where there's a will, we make a way

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where there's a will, we make a way

by bubonickitten

Summary

"So, what does happen if an Eye learns to See within itself?

What happens is this: the Archive Beholds the Watcher – and the Watcher blinks first."

Jon goes back to before the world ended and tries to forge a different path.

Notes

A few things from the top:

(1) For the first few chapters, Jon's dialogue will consist entirely of statements from the episodes (cited in the end notes), but he'll have original dialogue at some point (probably by chapter 4).

(2) Martin's absence is left intentionally vague (and there are moments in the first couple chapters of Jon grieving for him), BUT I promise Martin will be back (probably by chapter 3 or 4 once I figure out how I want to pace things). Time travel is great like that.

(3) The first couple chapters will be rough but I promise it won't be all bummers going forward.

See the end of the work for more notes

Hubris

Chapter Summary

Statement of the Archive, Jonathan Sims, regarding Jonah Magnus' hubris and subsequent downfall.

Chapter Notes

CWs for Chapter 1: canon-typical horror & sadness; canon-typical spiders; mentions of canon-typical trauma (including being held captive by the Circus); (temporary) major character loss/absence; spoilers up to and including MAG 169; brief instance of misgendering (not in a malicious way - Jon just has restricted speech options at this point in the story - but I wanted to mention it just in case).

UPDATE: verona-rupes made some stunning fanart for this chapter!! Please go check it out. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At the end of the world, a tape recorder clicks on, uncountable eyes open wide, and the Archive begins to speak.

"There is a tower at the center of creation.

"Jutting up from the scorched earth, it casts its oppressive shadow over all, so certain of its rightful place in this world. But although it may appear sturdy and eternal, it is, like everything else in this place, decaying – more slowly than the rest, but moving inexorably toward its own extinction all the same.

"In the dying light of a ruined world, it Watches over all that crawls and chokes and blinds and falls and twists and leaves and hides and weaves and burns and hunts and rips and leads and dies. For now, it is sated and gorged on the fear permeating its perfect world – but what happens when the fear runs out? There will come a time when each pinprick of life blinks out

around it, one by one, taunting it with the dreadful knowledge of its ultimate, encroaching fate: a slow, agonizing death of boredom and isolation and starvation.

*"And it will **hurt**.*

"Nothing lasts forever, but rest assured: the tower will be the last thing standing, wilting alone in a barren and desiccated realm of its own making. It will be outlived only by death itself, and even then, only for the briefest of moments.

"The tower is a monument to hubris, and as such, it is destined to collapse."

The recorder clicks off and Jonathan Sims comes back to himself, standing alone before the menacing bulk of the Panopticon. The statement was shorter than he's used to, but it isn't surprising – he can't See much here, in the Watcher's domain. Still, it took a lot out of him.

He barely has time to take a breath before a familiar door opens up in the ground just in front of him, its yellow paint chipped and faded. The Distortion's ringing laughter ripples up from the ground. Jon closes his eyes, sighs heavily, and counts to ten.

"No 'hello' for me, Archivist?" Helen pulls herself up and out of her door to loom over him. "You've become quite rude these past few… how long has it been?"

Shaking his head, Jon readjusts the straps of his backpack and starts to walk. Helen, of course, prowls after him. Her gait seems different, Jon realizes, and when he trains his sight on her – yes, apparently she's added an extra kneecap to her left leg. She watches him with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes, daring him to comment on her latest modification, but he's learned by now that it's best not to encourage the Distortion.

"That was a rather short monologue for you. I *very* much doubt your patron will be satiated."

"Oh, how I wish he'd go away," Jon mutters under his breath. The pronoun is wrong, but it still gets the point across, and Helen is familiar enough with his current mode of

communication to catch his meaning.

"Still voiceless, are we? It must be *very* frustrating for you. Reduced to rifling through others' trauma, forced to appropriate someone else's terror any time you want to talk. It really is a shame your lexicon is so… limited. You've always had such a lovely voice. It seems a waste to deny it any novelty."

Ignore her, he tells himself. *Just ignore her.*

"Silent treatment?" Helen pouts. "Well, that's fine. I can speak enough for the both of us."

Jon wishes he could comment on the irony of It Is Lies telling the truth, but the Archive doesn't offer up any fitting statements. Probably for the best, really; as a rule, he tries not to let Helen rile him. *Tries* being the key word.

"Off to see the Watcher? I do wonder how our dear Jonah is doing these days. You're curious too, aren't you? You can't See anything in there. You have no idea what you're walking into." Helen's lips curl in a too-wide smile. "That must drive you *mad*."

Jon ignores her. Even if he had something to say, he expects he would be speechless at the moment, beholding the Panopticon. The tower bears no resemblance to the Magnus Institute he remembers. It's the tallest thing left in the wasteland, now; standing at its base and looking up, it's impossible to estimate exactly how high it stretches. He could Know, but he doesn't care to. (The Eye bristles at his refusal to ask the question. Jon dismisses it with an almost childish defiance.)

All of the surrounding buildings have been reduced to dust and rubble, and there is no remaining evidence of there ever having been a street. The composition of the tower's walls is entirely obscured by a viscous coating of –

…aqueous humor, grave dirt, assorted viscera, sawdust, flensed dermis, dental pulp, spider silk…

– Jon closes his eyes and shoves the knowledge away with a practiced resolve. Its content is no more unsettling than anything else he's encountered, but even after all this time, having the Beholding hijack his thoughts is still nauseating. He had experienced intrusive thoughts long before becoming the Archivist, but Knowing takes the experience to an entirely different level.

After the moment has passed, Jon opens his eyes to resume surveying the tower. He can't tell if it no longer has windows, or if they're just hidden by the horror cocktail smothering its exterior. He supposes it doesn't really matter either way; the Watcher doesn't need windows to See outside. The staircase stretching to the entrance is impossibly long, and the stairs are of the narrow, shallow variety that never accommodate anyone's stride.

Jon sighs as he places one foot on the bottom step.

"That looks like an *awfully* long climb," Helen observes. "*And* a tripping hazard. I would offer you a shortcut, but… well, you know." She winks and flashes him a wicked grin just as her door materializes beneath her feet, dropping her down into a vertical corridor. "See you at the top, Archivist," she calls cheerfully, her door slamming behind her and vanishing.

Jon rolls his eyes and ascends the stairs.

The enormous doors to the tower are already open when Jon reaches the top of the steps. The moment he crosses the threshold, he is bathed in a blinding white light. Every one of his eyes reflexively snaps shut. One by one, the eldritch additions to which he has grown so accustomed wink out of existence until finally, for the first time in forever, he has just the two eyes he was born with. It's jarring, having his hundredfold, 360-degree sight so suddenly reduced back to a binocular field of vision, but it feels oddly freeing.

At the same time, he doesn't quite know what to make of it. Does the Watcher want him at a disadvantage? Is there something inherent to the Panopticon that allows only the Ceaseless Watcher itself to See, rendering all others – even its Archive – effectively blind? What if -

“Look at you!” Helen chirps directly into his ear, cackling when he startles. “My, you spook easily, Archivist. Not very becoming for one who Sees all and revels in the terror he has wrought.”

Jon is already walking away, albeit with small, uncertain steps. The light isn’t as overwhelming as it was before, but he still has to squint against it. As far as he can see, the interior of the tower is a flat expanse of white. He can't perceive any walls, a ceiling, even the floor, making it impossible to guess the size of the place – or if it has an end at all.

“Do you actually Know where you’re going?”

“I was finding it really hard to get a solid idea on where we were,” Jon admits.

“Yes. It’s quite like the tunnels, isn’t it? You never could See down there, either. What did you call it – ‘a universal blind spot’?” Helen tilts her head in disingenuous consideration. “Strange, how your voyeurism touches everything except your own domain.”

“I come to you not to wallow in my condition – but to request your assistance.”

She hasn’t been any help in ages, but Jon figures it’s worth a try. Helen simply laughs.

“What assistance could I possibly give? *You* are the most powerful thing the apocalypse has to offer, Archivist. Aside from the Entities themselves, that is. I’m certain you can figure it out on your own. As I’ve told you so many times, all you have to do is embrace it.” Jon glares at her. “Now, as much as I would *love* to stay and watch you get terribly lost, I believe there are more interesting things going on in the world.”

With that, her door swings open on the invisible ground in front of her.

“I thanked them as they left, even though they had been of no help whatsoever,” Jon grumbles to himself.

“You *are* tetchy today,” Helen teases. “Well, I’ll check back in with you later.”

She steps off the ledge and plummets down through her door again, pulling it shut after her. Jon pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs. It’s incredible how after all this time, even a short encounter with the Distortion leaves him feeling drained.

But she did have a point. He never could See in the tunnels, but that was before he became the Archive. As he is now, he probably has a better chance of finding his way than Helen would. It’s just that doing so is bound to be… unpleasant.

No use putting it off, though. He closes his eyes, looks inward, opens the door, and –

A churning deluge of information crashes into him, sweeping him along in its undertow. All at once, he’s drowning.

…the equatorial circumference of Jupiter was 439,263.8 kilometres before it was devoured by the ravenous Falling Titan…

…Mr. Spider has taken up residence behind innumerable doors – not every door, but any door. It has an average of one guest for dinner every thirty-nine minutes and still it is hungry…

…the Sandman and the Buried wage war over scraps within the catacombs of Paris, now located approximately 6,294.2 kilometres below creation and sinking…

…as of 23.8 seconds ago, the Crawling Rot and the Lightless Flame have completed their race to consume the endless apartment block located at the corner of Nowhere and –

Jon shakes his head and tries to refine his search.

Tell me about Jonah Magnus.

...Jonah Magnus was born in –

Tell me where I can *find* Jonah Magnus.

...Jonah Magnus is –

A wave of force crashes into Jon like a freight train and then he's back in the white space, eyes open, gasping for air and struggling to fill his aching lungs.

It comes as no surprise that the Ceaseless Watcher doesn't want him to Know the way, but if the Eye didn't want to be Seen, it should have picked someone less inquisitive. Or less stubborn.

He takes a deep breath, steels himself, and dives back in.

...in a hollowed-out sanctuary of bone and gristle, the Boneturner scavenges uselessly for –

Tell me where to find Jonah Magnus.

A harsh buzz of static starts to ring in his ears.

...the Distortion in its corridors waits for –

Show me how to reach Jonah Magnus.

The static pitches up into a shrill whine.

...Martin Blackwood's last –

ANSWER ME.

The noise reaches an earsplitting crescendo, then cuts out abruptly and –

When the Archive opens its myriad eyes, it Knows the way.

Once the knowledge settles in his mind, it's as if a veil has been lifted. As the empty, directionless white void resolves itself into perceptible details, Jon finds himself standing in a cavernous, cylindrical space. Countless iron-barred prison cells are recessed into weathered red-brick walls, stacked vertically one on top of the other and stretching all the way up to an impossibly high vaulted ceiling covered in… cobwebs.

Of course. It figures the Web would have infiltrated this place. In fact, it probably staked out its territory when the initial foundations for Millbank Prison were laid and had simply never left.

Jon shudders and looks away. Or tries to, anyway; there are always a few recalcitrant eyes that linger on the things he does not want to See.

He turns his attention to the observation tower. Its looming presence seems to take up the entire room, radiating a palpable sense of dread. There is nowhere in this world that its gaze cannot reach, but being this close to it is nearly unbearable.

It *hurts*.

Jon forces himself to stand there, to experience and endure the sheer weight of its omniscient scrutiny concentrated wholly on him. This is what it's like to be Seen by the Archive, and Jon needs to Know how it feels – how it felt when he turned the Ceaseless Watcher's gaze upon the monsters he met on the journey to the Panopticon.

And it *hurts.*

It's like having his consciousness torn to shreds, every memory and thought and experience comprising his existence ripped out of him, pinned under a microscope, dissected with precision, classified and then hoarded away by a dispassionate curator. It's sharp angles and blinding lights and throat-rending screams and scalding heat; it's burrowing worms and scalpel blades and crushing earth and cold plastic hands; it's fear and pain and love and *loss* and it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts *it hurts it hurts* ***it hurts*** –

Jon's knees give out and he crumples to the floor, panting, resting his head in his twitching hands as the aftershocks of white-hot pain ripple through him. He lets himself roll over onto his side and curls into a fetal position while he waits for the tremors to stop.

Martin wouldn't have approved, but Jon had to Know. He had to Know what it was like, if the monsters he killed deserved it, if the punishment was proportionate to the crime, and –

They did and it was. He can confidently say that each sentence he handed out was justified, and it's somewhat of a relief.

Beyond that, though, experiencing it firsthand was the best way he could think to fully appreciate the consequences of allowing his potential to go unchallenged and unrestrained, and to make clearer the distinction between Jonathan Sims, the Watched and the Archive, the Watcher – or conduit of the Watcher, at least. If nothing else, the memory of it will be an anchor going forward – a searing reminder of how much is at stake and the ultimate cost should his plan fail.

And, of course, it was also an effective way to assess the power he has at his disposal, to determine whether he's strong enough for his plan to work. He did survive it, at least, which seems like a good sign. Hopefully it's a good sign.

As the pain fades to a dull ache, he pushes himself to his feet and takes a minute to compose himself before entering the observation tower. He has not come eye to eye with Jonah Magnus since before the world ended, before he forced himself through the domains of each and every fear that marked him, before he completed his metamorphosis. That was the point of the journey, he realizes now: reliving the terror and retracing every mark was necessary for him to emerge as the fully-fledged Archive.

He hopes it was all worth it.

Jon takes a deep breath, braces himself, and crosses the threshold.

Jonah Magnus is a pitiful sight.

He sits slumped on the Watcher's throne within his lonely observation tower, ropes of spider silk binding him in place. The look in his eyes when he beholds his Archive is entirely unreadable, and Jon doesn't care to Know.

Well – his two original eyes, in any case. The other eyes bulging through Jonah's skin – bloodshot, rolling and twitching in all directions, and glowing a repellent shade of green – belong to the Watcher, and all they contain is a cold, measured fascination. Jon wonders absently whether they might cluster beneath the skin as well, a fitting mirror of Albrecht von Closen's gruesome fate. Martin would have appreciated the poetic justice of that thought.

Jon takes a step forward.

"I don't think I'll ever know what they expected to happen."

The Archive's voice rips through the silence like a clap of thunder on a clear day. There is something of a command threaded through the words, a power that brooks no argument and

permits no lies. Jonah flinches at the force of it, and Jon takes that as his cue to continue; he has Jonah's full attention now.

"It's weird, isn't it, the things that can change your life?" Jon wonders, briefly, how Tim would feel about his statement being repurposed like this. Hopefully he would approve, seeing the way Elias – *Jonah* – is rendered silent and cowed in its wake, even if Jon's voice is the vehicle. Either way, stolen words are Jon's only option, and so he presses on: *"You can plan for all the devastating, terrible possibilities you can imagine, and it'll always be those tiny,* unexpected *things that get you. You know, the things that you never even noticed as they were happening, just… just nudging everything into motion. But even if there was a way I could have known, I really don't think I'd be able to have stopped him."*

When Jonah opens his mouth as if to speak, Jon catches a glimpse of a roving eye sprouting from Jonah's tongue. What comes out is not words, but a small spider, creeping languidly over his lip and up his cheek, as if summoned by the Archive's mere mention of manipulation. Even from a distance, Jon can See all eight of its eyes focus on him.

The Spider perches there, patient and waiting. Whether she is issuing an invitation, a challenge, or simple, curious observation, the Archive does not Know, and Jon will not waste his energy searching for the answer.

Curiosity always has been Jon's fatal flaw, he thinks. It can be an asset in moderate doses, but he habitually took it to endangering and self-destructive extremes. By now he has learned how to wield that curiosity with precision, patience, and careful calculation. It was a lesson hard learned and at great cost, but now he knows: there is a difference between a constructive avenue of inquiry and a dead end. One leads to answers that need knowing; the other only sates the Eye's voracious appetite and leaves Jon adrift and wanting. The trick is to prioritize – which means accepting the existence of questions that aren't worth asking.

The Eye balks at an unsolved mystery, and the Archive's every instinct drives Jon to seek, to ask, to know at any and all costs – but this is not the first time he has weathered the dueling instincts of Archive, Archivist, and human, and it will not be the last. If he stands in the crossfire long enough, breathes through the dissonance, and allows himself to simply *exist* as the strange, contradictory gestalt his apotheosis has made him… eventually, he can find the quiet.

In any case, the Archive's eyes outnumber the Spider's by far, and Jon meets her gaze with a resolve that still feels new and untested, but unyielding nonetheless. Neither of them blink, but the Spider does eventually – slowly, so slowly – crawl away and out of sight.

A stalemate. Jon expected nothing more or less; these confrontations with the Web never have a satisfying conclusion, only a protracted, stop-and-start hiatus.

When Jon feels the Spider's presence fade away, he lets out a breath he didn't realize he was holding. For all his bravado, the fear never has gone away. He suspects that the Eye would never give him the choice in the first place. It isn't enough to *Know* or *See* the contents of his library – he has to *live* them, *feel* them, *share* in them, or else the knowledge is not comprehensive. The Beholding requires more than facts and words and retellings. It demands the insight and dread that comes only from lived experience, and it has no use for an Archive that cannot fully experience its own catalog.

If Jon *was* given the choice, though, he still wouldn't give up the fear. It's the fabric of this world, which makes it a reliable anchor as long as it exists. It tethers him to his humanity; it reminds him of his reason; it keeps him moving forward.

And so, he approaches the Watcher's throne, and the Archive resumes its recitation:

"I continue to see in you the reflection of my own past hubris."

It's a nice touch, Jon thinks, using Robert Smirke's dying words to rub salt in the wound, and the surge of stunned outrage on Jonah's face confirms that for him.

"Why does *a man seek to destroy the world?"*

Jonah's human eyes widen ever so slightly as he recognizes his own words.

"...you would quite willingly doom that world and confine the billions in it to an eternity of terror and suffering, all to ensure your own happiness, to place yourself beyond pain and

death and fear."

Jon kneels before the throne, a mocking gesture of fealty to a man who so arrogantly believed that he was to be –

"…a king of a ruined world" – he pauses, fast-forwarding the statement in his mind, picking through disparate fragments to cobble together something that can convey his intended meaning – *"had miscalculated."* Another pause, and then: *"The ritual failed."*

Jonah squirms against his bindings, though whether it is in fear or frustration or anger, Jon does not know. He does not *need* to know, and he strangles that alien part of him that wants to taste exactly what flavor of distress struggles in front of him. He refuses to feed the Eye, even if it *is* at Jonah's expense.

"…as much a victim as any" – Jon gives a curt nod to indicate Jonah – *"trapped in the nightmare landscape of a twisted world."*

When he sees the glint of the knife, Jonah's eyes widen further and he redoubles his thrashing. Jon is flooded with memories of his month held captive by the Circus – rough ropes chafing at his bare skin; cold, plastic hands slathering him in strong-smelling lotions; bruises that lingered long after he escaped through the Distortion's door. Part of him wishes that he could enjoy seeing Jonah like this – the one who orchestrated that trauma and so many others – but all he feels is that familiar revulsion that rises up in him any time he catches a whiff of bergamot.

Another, louder part of him is relieved to find that even after everything, he still can't quite bring himself to find pleasure in torture.

Taking revenge on Jude Perry, obliterating the NotThem, casting the Ceaseless Watcher's gaze upon countless other monsters prowling through this ravaged world… it felt good in the immediate aftermath – to make them appreciate the terror and pain they had wrought, to stand in their presence not as a victim but as a long-overdue consequence. As soon as the adrenaline wore off, though, he would always crash. Whether or not they deserved their fates was never what haunted him the most. It was the simple act of using the same power that destroyed the world that always left him feeling sick, guilty, divorced from what remained of

his humanity, and terrified of what he could become if he embraced his role as the Archive. It felt good in the same way that compelling live statements used to, and that frightened him.

Still, Jon has a point to make. He draws the knife to Jonah's face and holds the tip mere centimeters from his right eye, poised to strike. Jonah freezes and Jon stares him down. The Archive's innumerable eyes open wide and focus laser-like on Jonah's, and it waits for the would-be king to blink first.

And he does.

With that, Jon stands and drops the knife. As it clatters to the floor, Jonah opens his human eyes cautiously, looking first at the discarded weapon and then back to his Archive with uncertainty etched onto his face.

"...didn't even have the decency *to kill me,"* the Archive says. Jon has to swallow down a wave of hatred at the memory of Peter Lukas' voice, but he needs Jonah to *understand* this choice his Archivist has made. To truly appreciate the fate to which he is being condemned.

The Archive reaches for Gertrude next: *"They might even stop death entirely, deny us the one last escape, keeping us alive and afraid – forever."*

It takes a moment for the words to sink in, but the existential terror slowly dawns in Jonah's eyes. His greatest fear may have always been mortality, but faced with the reality of what an immortal existence could actually entail, well…

"You'll get used to it here, in the world that we have made."

Jonah Magnus' own triumphant declaration reverberates through the cavernous space in the voice of the Archive he forced into being. The words sound as smug and gleeful as they did the first time the Archivist read them to an empty room, on the day he opened the door.

Behind it all, though, is Jonathan Sims. Not the Archive, not the Archivist, just… Jon. He feels no catharsis, no gratification, no closure. He just feels *tired.*

But he didn't come all this way to the Panopticon just to monologue at Jonah Magnus. This is the stronghold of the Eye, and that makes it Jon's best chance of actually communing with the Beholding.

He places the tape recorder on the floor next to the discarded knife and turns his back on the man who sought to reign over a desolated world. As Jon walks away, the recorder clicks on, and the Archive's final statement begins to play:

"There is a tower at the center of creation…"

Chapter End Notes

- If you haven't seen verona-rupes' fanart for this chapter, check it out here! <3

- Jon's dialogue for chapter 1 taken from the statements in the following episodes, in order: MAG 085; MAG 149; MAG 098; MAG 027; MAG 137; MAG 104; MAG 138; MAG 160 (x4); MAG 159; MAG 162; MAG 160 (again).

- Comments greatly appreciated, and constructive criticism is welcome!! I've never actually written and posted a multi-chapter fic from start to finish, but I want to commit myself to this one. I'm using it as practice for my own original story writing going forward, so knowing what works and what doesn't will be helpful feedback for me.

- Again, I promise Martin will be back and that this won't be all bummers. The first two chapters are just... particularly rough, but I'm trying to sneak in some lightheartedness here and there to get through it.

- I'm also on Tumblr at bubonickitten!

Tapestry

Chapter Summary

In which the Watcher becomes the Watched.

Chapter Notes

Or: Jonathan Sims has a staring contest with the Beholding.

CWs for Chapter 2: grief & loss; brief mention of past self-harm; some blink-and-you'll-miss-it internalized ableism re: ADHD; flashbacks re: canon-typical trauma, including dehumanization/having one's bodily autonomy overridden; internalized victim-blaming; and one (1) very persistent spider.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jon waits until Jonah is out of sight before he lets himself fall apart.

With the Archive taking the lead, it was easier to distance himself from the human experience of it all. He could set aside Jonathan Sims' real-time reactions to the situation, shelve them to be processed at a later time. Now, all those memories are rushing back in at once. He's trembling all over as he sinks to the floor, fighting back tears, his breath coming in shallow gasps.

Clearly he underestimated what seeing Jonah Magnus again would do to him. Staring into the eyes of the man who stripped him of agency and humanity, taunting and gloating as he led him into trauma after trauma, setting him on the path to becoming a weapon and a monster and a hapless victim all at once…

Jonah's statement wormed its way into Jon's head on the day the world ended, and it's lived there ever since, playing on a loop and consuming him from the inside out.

…when you came to me already marked by the Web, I knew it had to be you…

Did the Web choose Jon from the very beginning? Or did he just have the bad luck to stumble upon the book, only then to catch the Web's attention? How much of this broken future is due to an insufferable child's inability to stop being such a nuisance and just *sit still* for five minutes? Even back then, he had that restless, insatiable curiosity, driving him to wander off and ignore any sign of danger.

...attacks on the Archives were not uncommon during Gertrude's tenure, and while she was always prepared, I made sure you would not be…

He had always been fumbling in Gertrude's shadow. Tim and Basira always thought that everyone would be better off if Jon had tried to emulate her. He disagrees with that now, but *still,* Gertrude wouldn't have fallen for such obvious traps. She never let the Eye turn her monstrous, never let Jonah turn her into such a pliable sacrifice.

...I waited until the worms were in you before I pulled the lever. I needed to make sure you felt that fear all the way to your bones…

And he did, he *did;* the sense memories still haunt him, as marrow-deep as the worms once were. Some days he can still feel them burrowing and his fingers curl around an imaginary corkscrew as he's swept away by the panicked urge to *dig*.

...it was just a matter of feeding you statements to lead you to a few Avatars I thought were likely to harm you – but probably would stop short of actually killing you…

At every turn, Jon had played right into Jonah's hands. Georgie warned him that his stubborn investigations would destroy him, and he pressed on anyway. He may have been dependent on the statements by then – though he didn't know it at the time – but he didn't *have* to seek out Jude Perry or Mike Crew, did he? Is it any wonder Georgie gave up on him?

...I made sure to trap her here, so when her rage bubbled over you would be right here, a ready target. I didn't foresee the mark coming from surgery gone wrong, but it was a very pleasant surprise…

Melanie. God, *Melanie.* She had fought tooth and nail to make a place for herself in a world that underestimated her. She was the protagonist of her own story until Jonah forced her to play a supporting role in Jon's. It was never Jon's intention, but the fact remains: if it wasn't for him, Melanie would never have been trapped.

...you needed more than just the marks; you needed power. And that was something the Unknowing served to test, though it posed no actual danger in the grand scheme of things…

More meat for the grinder, more lives sacrificed solely for the Archivist's progress. Tim died for nothing, Daisy was subjected to the Buried for nothing, and –

…it inadvertently pushed you to confront death, a mark I had been very worried about trying to orchestrate…

– Martin was ushered into Peter Lukas' machinations, all for *nothing*.

...you should have seen my face when you voluntarily went to him…

Jon feels sick imagining Jonah's unbridled delight at watching his ignorant, malleable chosen one so willingly offer himself up to the Boneturner. Could Jon have made it any easier for him to win?

...how is Martin, by the way? You will keep an eye on him when all this is over, won't you? He's earned that…

He'd promised, he *promised* he would protect Martin, and his best just wasn't good enough.

Jon leans against the nearest wall, curls in on himself, and gives in to the wracking sobs. He *hates* Jonah – hates him in a way he never thought he would be capable of hating anything – but even now, the anger is eclipsed by the fear and the scars it left behind. He feels more like a victim than a survivor. He could take retribution on Jonah in a million ways and Jonah would be powerless to stop him, but it doesn't change anything: all the power in the world

won't chase away the grief, the nightmares, the incessant fear and pain the Eye filters though him every moment.

One look at Jonah, and the memory came rushing back: Jonah using him as a mouthpiece, the statement slithering into Jon's mind and commandeering his tongue, forcing his eyes to open, moving his jaw like a ventriloquist's dummy, only to cut the strings and send him buckling to the floor as soon as he'd served his purpose. He had tried to scratch out his eyes, claw out his throat, but every wound would heal before the pain even registered. And Jonah –

...I hope you'll forgive me the self-indulgence, but I have worked so very hard for this moment, a culmination of two centuries of work. It's rare that you get the chance to monologue through another, and you can't tell me you're not curious…

– it wasn't enough for him just to get the result he wanted. He had to take the opportunity to degrade his victim one last time; had to use Jon's own voice to do it. There are times when Jon can't even listen to himself speak without flashing back to that moment and unraveling into full-blown panic. He hadn't felt human for a long time by that point, but the Ritual… it was dehumanizing in a way he could have never imagined. He'll never be free of that memory, no matter how far he runs, no matter how much Jonah Magnus suffers, and no matter whether he manages to reverse the damage –

Stop, he tells himself. *Spiraling isn't helping. Play it back again, slower this time, and think. How would Martin respond, if he was here?*

Running was never an option. *You're probably right.* Jonah Magnus' suffering has no impact on Jon's state of being. *He still deserves to have his eyes gouged out – yes, okay, fine! Priorities, I know.* (A nearly imperceptible smile tugs at the corner of Jon's mouth at that.) Reversing the damage, though, making things right – that's still on the table. There's still a chance. *Then I'd say it's worth a try,* Martin would say, and between the reassurance of his smile and the sincerity in his eyes, Jon would believe him.

Jon imagines Martin sitting beside him, arm around his waist, a warm and comforting weight for him to lean on. Thankfully, blessedly, it's just as strong a sense memory as the nesting worms and Jude's searing handshake and the Boneturner's groping fingers in his chest cavity. Martin helped him relearn that physical contact is not always synonymous with pain and fear and violence. *Safe hands, warm eyes, gentle touch.* Jon holds fast to that thought and lets it anchor him until the storm passes.

Eventually – Jon doesn't care to Know how much time has passed – his sobbing dissolves into broken hiccups, and then into exhausted sniffling. He sits up, scrubs at his face, and forces himself to breathe. The guilt is still there, the pain is still acute, but he has a job to do.

Once he's composed enough, he forces himself to stand and lets his feet take him to where he Knows he needs to be.

As Jon mounts the spiral staircase leading to the top of the tower, Helen's door creaks open on the wall ahead of him.

"That little confrontation was a bit dramatic, Archivist."

Ten many-jointed fingers curl around the frame. Or twelve, or maybe sixteen, or – it's not important. Jon stops counting and continues climbing.

"And what did it accomplish?" Helen's face peeks through the opening now. "You've changed nothing." When Jon does not reply, she leaves her doorway and plants herself on the staircase a few steps above him. She leans down close to his eye level and tilts her head at a disquieting angle. "Ah, but that wasn't the point, was it? That spectacle was all for *you.*"

Jon doesn't have to Know to determine that Helen is *bored,* which means she isn't going to leave until he entertains her. Better to get it over with, he figures, and so he finally focuses on her and shakes his head fervently.

"Oh, of course. *Martin*." Helen smiles – cruel and condescending as always, but Jon thinks he can detect some fondness there as well. "He really did rub off on you, didn't he? He would have enjoyed that little performance. The sheer *pettiness* of it all."

Jon allows himself a rueful little smile. She's right: Martin would have *loved* that little standoff. Jon can picture the moment of awe in the aftermath – the lopsided grin, the stammering insistence that *Jon, that was amazing,* and the inevitable moment once the adrenaline wore off when Martin would tell him: *I know I keep saying this, but I didn't think it was possible for me to be any more attracted to you.* And much later, once they were safe and the dust was settled, they would joke about it: Martin would do a terrible impersonation – always fond, never cruel – and Jon would point out that it *did* have the intended effect –

"Daydreaming, are we?" Helen barks a laugh when Jon startles, his face heating with embarrassment. "Even after all this time, you really are *adorable*."

Jon groans and makes a shooing gesture in Helen's direction. Her laughter reverberates even more than usual; it leaves Jon with the distinct sensation of chewing on tinfoil, and his teeth begin to ache.

As the echoes fade away, Helen pantomimes wiping a tear from her eye. "So, do you really think this plan is any better than your standard fare?"

Honestly, Jon has no idea.

"I'm well aware that" – a brief pause as he skips ahead in the statement – *"to try and prevent whatever fate is coming – is likely impossible anyway, but after what I saw, I couldn't live with myself if I didn't at least try."*

It's odd, using Oliver's original statement like this to express a worldview so antithetical to his current stance. Comparing the person Oliver used to be – desperate to change fate, then desperate to escape it – with who he is now… it's still unsettling, to see how much a person can change after coming into contact with one of the Entities.

"Hmm. I still think you're fighting a lost battle. But I am *very* curious to see what happens when you try."

Jon shifts from one foot to the other, hitching his bag higher on his back and giving Helen a pointed look.

“Impatient to meet your god? Well, don’t let me keep you.” Helen steps back over the threshold of her door. “Try not to get vaporized, will you?”

The door swings shut on Helen’s delighted cackle and Jon lets out a long, exhausted breath before continuing his ascent.

Jon doesn’t know how long it takes, but eventually he reaches the top of the tower. The staircase opens up into a circular, empty room: stone walls, stone floor, stone ceiling. The only noteworthy detail is a stylized eye carved into the very center of the floor. As far as Jon can tell, there’s nothing arcane about the symbol at all – just a bit of trite aesthetic flair for an otherwise bare temple. Still, now that geography has ceased functioning, it marks the exact center point of the wasteland, and it’s exactly where Jon needs to be.

He has no way of Knowing whether this will work. He still isn’t even entirely sold on the idea of the Fears being sentient, rather than just… forces of nature, no more or less conscious than gravity. But it’s the only idea he has left, and it’s something that he and Martin planned together, which makes it worth trying. If it doesn’t work, then… well, with any luck, hopefully he won’t live long enough for it to matter. Not that Jon has ever been particularly *lucky* –

Several of his eyes swivel and train themselves on a single speck moving down the far wall. He hears his voice before he even makes the conscious decision to speak:

“Leave.”

The word comes out as a cacophony of overlapping tones and Jon staggers with the force of it. The spider, for its part, scuttles through a crack and out of sight at the command, leaving Jon alone and swaying with vertigo.

This is why he hates vocalizing single words: it means replaying *every* instance of the word stored in the Archive simultaneously, and it always leaves him feeling like a blown out

speaker. It's safest to stick to full, unique phrases – anything with an exact combination of words that occurs only once in all of the Archive's records.

Ears still ringing, Jon shakes his head and tries to reorient himself. If he's quick, maybe he can get what he needs and retreat before the Web interferes again. He hurries to the middle of the room, stands on the pupil at the center of the eye motif, and –

As the Ceaseless Watcher turns its gaze on him again, Jon prepares himself for a repeat of its earlier scrutiny. It starts slow: a searing, infectious ache jumping its way from cell to cell like a charged current, seizing upon every scrap of conscious thought, building up to a crescendo of rending, electric agony.

This time, though, the Archive Watches back.

Helen had said it best: *There are exactly two roles available in this new world of ours: The Watcher, and the Watched. Subject, and object.*

What happens when a part of the Eye allows itself to embrace both roles? What happens when the Eye's pupil shifts its focus on itself?

An eye can't see inside itself, Jon had said once. And much later, out of the blue, Martin had mused: *But what if it could?*

Jon has averaged at least one identity crisis a day ever since becoming the Archivist – or he *had*, at least, back before "day" lost all meaning as a unit of measurement. Over time, Martin grew accustomed to sitting through Jon's hand-wringing over how much of his humanity remained. Martin always maintained that, first, it wasn't as simple a dichotomy as Jon wanted it to be, and second, Jon was human in all the ways that mattered.

At some point as they journeyed through the dying world, though, Martin suggested a new theory. Jonah Magnus had presented a one-way progression from human to Archivist to Archive. His Ritual was meant to be a final act of dehumanization, wherein Jon would cease to exist as a person and become instead a perpetual conduit for the Eye. But in Martin's

estimation, Jon never fully lost himself. It was more like he had fractured into multiple states of being.

After he opened the door, Jon could – was forced to, really – See everything that the Eye could See. The part of him that was Jonathan Sims felt the fear and suffering as it was (that is to say, *horrific*); the part of him that was the Archive felt only detached fascination and a sense that everything was just as it should be, because this was the role it was born to serve. The result was a dissonant, twilight emotional state wherein everything felt both right and horribly, irredeemably wrong.

It was reminiscent of reading statements. When he first started out, he hated it – he could literally feel the fear of the statement givers as if it was his own, and it always left him feeling exhausted. Then, at some point, came the physical dependence. Without his realizing, the statements became life-sustaining rather than draining. Even then, though, the fear never actually went away – he was just forced to vicariously feel the Eye's perverse satisfaction in it. Sometimes it felt like being made complicit in his own terror; sometimes it just made him feel numb. It was like having a parasite tucked away inside his mind, passing its own wants and needs onto him and making him feel them as if they were his own.

And now, every instance of fear in this new world is a statement to be taken in by the Beholding and dutifully filed away inside the Archive - and all of it has to go through Jon first.

He also has some control over the Eye, though: he can focus its gaze and, as its Archive, he does theoretically have access to most of its knowledge, so long as he knows where to look. He's taken to it just as much as he hates it, constantly flitting between roles from one moment to the next like a moth wavering between funeral pyres.

How is it that I can Know almost anything, but I still can't come to any conclusions about myself? Jon stormed during one of his self-targeted, not-so-infrequent tirades between domains. *What even am I now? Not human, so - Archive, Archivist, both? And what does that even mean? Does it even matter?*

Martin waited until Jon finished venting and lapsed into an exhausted silence before taking both of Jon's hands, meeting his gaze, and telling him, very seriously: *How about all three?*

Jon initially took it as a dig at his habitual indecisiveness, but Martin was being sincere. He suggested that Jon try to embrace being a walking paradox, to use that multiplicity to his advantage – and that was the premise upon which they'd built their future strategies. As they pressed on toward the Panopticon, they each took turns acting as the other's anchor, and Jon practiced compartmentalizing. Now, finally, it's time to put the hypothesis to the test.

So, what *does* happen if an Eye learns to See within itself?

What happens is this: the Archive Beholds the Watcher –

...the Eye in the sky scans forward, back; stares into, through; sweeps above, below. Nothing escapes its gaze: not the bloated bodies swaying listlessly in the vast deep; not the cooling cinders of an endless building at last consumed and rendered to nothing but ash in the wind; not the algal bloom suffocating a corpse-choked lake long-dead and fetid; not the merry-go-round with its rusted gears and peeling-paint horses…

...far away, the Falling Titan drifts aimless in a void where the stars flicker in and out and eventually not at all; emaciated beasts of the Hunt stagger listless in search of a chase, falling one by one in the dust as the prey remains scarce; the endless war has been reduced to pilotless technology running through the same protocols over and over, few human minds remaining to witness or suffer the collateral damage…

...closer, the paint continues to flake away from the Distortion's doors; the Sandman is running out of eye sockets to plunder; the Forsaken despairs the absence of lonely souls to appreciate its embrace; the Corpse Routes continue their inexorable crawl toward the center of creation, wilting all the way…

...there is nothing new under the roving Eye; moments blur together, time runs down, and every grain of sand in the hourglass is the same, the same, the same, the same…

...closer, closer, honing in: follow the woven threads and observe how all the lines converge on a single point…

– and the Watcher blinks first.

When Jon finally comes to, he's sprawled on the floor, all twitching limbs and exhaustion. Dazed, unfocused eyes blink in and out of existence around him, making his vision go pixelated and wobbly. He swats uselessly at them – or tries to, anyway, before realizing belatedly that he can barely lift his arms. *Like a cat waking up from anesthesia*, he thinks with a delirious little chuckle. What he wouldn't give for a cat video compilation – *no. Focus*.

Standing up is out of the question right now, but the brain fog is starting to clear. It was so much all at once, but he tries to parse it.

The world is running through the same loops now, over and over and over again. He could revisit every domain he trudged through on the way to the Panopticon and any statement he could offer up would be nearly identical to the one he gave the first time around. Victim after victim fed to the endless slaughter, sacrificed at the eternal maypole, retracing the same lonely paths in the fog. The same buildings burning again and again in the exact same way; the same worms struggling one-step-forward, two-steps-back in the same tunnels day after day; the strangers on the merry-go-round trading the same limited supply of faces in a closed economy of uncanny horror.

It's… monotonous. Predictable. *Stale*. And the Ceaseless Watcher never was satisfied by stale statements – oh. *Oh.*

The Eye is *bored,* Jon realizes all at once. Or – no, maybe that's not the right word. Malnourished, perhaps? Or is that still too anthropomorphizing? Even after coming into direct contact with the Beholding, he still can't say with any certainty whether it has any mind or will of its own. It could just be that the metaphysical concept itself is unraveling without anything to meaningfully oppose or contextualize it – much like trying to conceive of the Lonely without the existence of others, or how the Buried and the Vast shore up one another's definitions simply by being so polarized.

Or, ironically, perhaps the Eye is simply weakened by its visibility in this new world.

The Beholding is the fear of being watched, of being judged, of having one's secrets exposed. Or, how did Gerry put it… *the feeling that something, somewhere, is letting you suffer, just so*

it can watch. Jon thinks back on his months-long bout of paranoia, and he remembers that one of the most frightening things about it was his inability to trust his own judgment. There was always that creeping fear that perhaps it really was all in his mind, and – when he thinks about it, that paranoia might not have had the same bite to it if he knew for a *fact* that he was being watched and precisely who or what was doing the watching.

The fear of the unknown is an important variable. Once all your secrets are known, what else can the Eye take from you? Once your suspicions are confirmed and the source of your fear has a name, how can it use your doubt to taunt you? In this new world, *everything* can behold the Eye in the sky. *Everyone* is fully aware that they are being watched, and the identity of the Watcher is indisputable. It dilutes the fear. The Ceaseless Watcher may well have been at its most terrifying when it was at its most subtle, in the world where the Dread Powers still lurked in the shadows.

And *now* – now, on top of all that, the End's promise looms nearer and nearer every day. What is an observer with nothing to observe? What is the Watcher without mortal minds to experience the terror of being Watched? Jonah Magnus' nightmare kingdom is as inimical to the Ceaseless Watcher as it is to all the other Fears and all of their victims.

It takes a minute before Jon realizes he's laughing at the absurdity of it all.

Jon still feels a bit lightheaded as he exits the Panopticon, mind abuzz with hypotheticals. He's jittery, excited – afraid, yes, but the anticipation is tinged with hope. He isn't prepared for Helen's sudden presence.

"So, how did it go?"

Jon scowls at her before he can think better of it, and her mouth quirks in amusement as she soaks in his momentary burst of alarm. He closes his eyes and begins to shuffle statements in his mind.

"...spent so very long staring into" – a brief skip ahead – *"infinity and knowing, truly knowing."*

“You’re telling me you had a staring contest with the Eye?”

It’s a simplistic and annoyingly flippant way to put it, but she isn’t *entirely* wrong. When Jon doesn’t deny it, Helen claps her hands together in delight.

“It just sat there and stared at me,” Jon continues. *“I didn’t like staring back at it. It made me feel strange, like it was sorting me into cuts of meat. There was more in those eyes than I’d ever seen -"*

“Jonathan, won’t you stop speaking in metaphor and get to the point?”

Judging by the twinkle in her eye, she’s enjoying his struggle to communicate. He really should know better than to let her rile him, but he feels himself growing irritable all the same.

“…a new door,” he says. *“And it wasn’t there before. The man asked me again what was inside –”*

In a flash, Helen has her deadly sharp fingers at his jugular, just barely brushing his skin. A few pinpricks of blood well up and heal almost immediately.

“Don’t you *dare* repurpose *my* words, Archivist,” she hisses.

It’s not easy to press Helen’s buttons, and Jon won’t deny the flicker of spiteful self-satisfaction that flares up in him at how the tables have turned for once. He doesn’t plan on provoking her further, though; they both know that she can’t kill him, but that doesn’t mean it wouldn’t hurt to have his throat skewered.

But he wasn’t using Helen Richardson’s statement just to antagonize her. It’s just that his library isn’t forthcoming with accurate words. After a few moments of perusal, he finds

something that *might* work. There's a risk of further inflaming Helen's temper by using a statement about the Distortion right now, but…

"…staring at them, measuring the patterns they created – the maths behind them – he was on the verge of a great truth."

Jon pauses, watching for Helen's reaction. The dangerous look in her eyes remains, but she lowers her hand.

"I'll allow it," she says. "Go on."

"He was going to shake mathematics to its foundations once he figured out the truth, hidden in those cascading fractal patterns."

To Helen's credit, she seems to be seriously attempting to interpret his meaning now.

"You Saw into the Eye's inner workings," she begins slowly, waiting for Jon's affirmative before continuing. "And you think you learned something about the underlying patterns of this reality." Jon nods again, more vigorously this time. "You think that you can use that understanding to… what, close the door you opened?"

Not quite wrong, but not quite right, either.

"He wanted to close it, lock it back in place and get some semblance of control back," Jon concedes.

But there *is* no other side of the door anymore, and the Fears can't be exiled if there's nowhere to send them.

"It was, to put it quite simply, impossible, and I must have approached it from a hundred different angles trying to make sense of it."

“Then what?” Helen lets out an incredulous little laugh. “You think you can… unravel this reality? Tug on the strings holding it together, reshape it to your liking?”

He doesn’t quite approve of the phrasing – *to your liking* – but it’s close enough. He’s actually pleasantly surprised that she managed to read that much into his clumsy attempts at an explanation, so he gives another nod.

“…to circumvent physics, and suspend natural laws,” he says excitedly, gesturing with his hands and tripping over his words as he stitches the sound bites together. *“Rewrite them wholesale – petty rules like space or time –”*

“And how exactly do you plan to do *that?”* Helen scoffs. “You may be overpowered now, but even you don’t have the capability to meddle with the fabric of reality.”

“You are prepared. You are ready. You are marked.” Jonah’s words leave a bitter taste on Jon's tongue, but hopefully it gets his point across. *“The power of the Ceaseless Watcher flows through you – in the world that we have made.”*

“That’s – you’re giving yourself far too much credit.” Helen sounds flustered now. That’s… rare, and Jon doesn’t quite know what to make of it. “You’ve always been a conduit, not a conscious actor. A tool, not an architect. All you did was open a door.” She gives him a severe, almost affronted look. “Reality is malleable, but that doesn’t mean *you* can manipulate it. You are not the Worker-of-Clay. You are not of the Web. The only ‘power’ that the Ceaseless Watcher grants you is *voyeurism.* You *Watch,* you observe, you… you sit on the sidelines and curate reality. You do not *shape* it.”

But I did, Jon thinks.

Compared to some of the other Avatars, his powers can seem passive. He has no command over insects or disease; he can’t reach into someone’s chest to turn their bones or cook their heart; he can’t drop people into the sky or disappear them into the fog; he doesn’t have the prowess of a Hunter or the berserker strength of the Slaughter. He Watches, he Knows, he Sees. He asks questions and he compels answers. And yet, he’s just as dangerous as the rest. He doesn't need to make physical contact in order to prey on others, nor does he need to lure

his victims into a pocket dimension. He invades them like the Crawling Rot and haunts them like Dark and traps them like the Buried, and all he has to do is use his voice. The insidiousness of it is part of what makes it so terrifying.

So yes, Watching and Knowing may not seem like much compared to the flashier abilities of the other Avatars, but being marked by each of them in turn molded him into something new – something with a voice that shattered and reshaped the world with a single invocation. The concepts of Watching and Being Watched are the metaphysical building blocks of this universe, and both of those are within his purview. The most fundamental law now is the interplay of Watcher versus Watched, and Jon balances precariously on the tightrope of a boundary between the two. His essence is unavoidably mercurial: he exists at multiple points along the spectrum simultaneously, darting from one end of the dichotomy to the other and never quite touching down on either side of the equation.

The power threaded through the tapestry of this reality is a part of him as much as he is a part of the Eye. And if he *pulls* in just the right way, in just the right place…

"All you did was open a door," Helen repeats, but softer this time, almost to herself.

But there's power in the small things, isn't there? Helen owes her current state to the simple act of opening a door, after all. For Jon, everything was set into motion when he opened a book. Curiosity is so very human, Jon thinks – it seems unfair that it could lead both of them so far astray from their humanity. Perhaps Jon's life is a Rube Goldberg machine painstakingly orchestrated by the Web, and finding the book was just the first domino in a long chain of missteps; or maybe his fate was just a perfect, unfortunate combination of bad luck, his own restless curiosity, and an entitled old man's god complex. It doesn't really matter; the consequences are the same.

As Jon starts walking, Helen paces after him. He watches with faint surprise as she wrings her hands uneasily – or a close enough approximation to it, anyway. It's disorientating to watch, like an Escher woodcut in fluid motion. Several eyes attempt to track her movements, but the endeavor only succeeds in making Jon dizzy.

"Where are you off to now?" Helen asks, voice leaden with uncharacteristic uncertainty.

"It felt like if you picked a line, any line, you could follow it through to the center, to some deep truth, if only your eye could keep track of the strands that had caught it."

"The Panopticon *is* the center."

Jon stops, turns, and shakes his head. *"A stronghold of the Web."*

"*Oh*," Helen says, eyes brightening in recognition.

Jon rubs the back of his neck and grimaces. *"I was returning to Hill Top Road, no matter what I might feel about it."*

"The axis of the Spider's web…" Helen gives the ground a long, pensive look. Then her eyes narrow and flick back up to meet Jon's. "And what exactly do you expect to do there?"

"A scar in reality, that I believe has since been compounded by the interferences of other powers."

"Yes, we all know about the rift," Helen says impatiently. "What do you plan to *do* with it?"

"She was going to wait and see." With that, Jon begins walking again.

"I changed my mind," Helen practically whines. "This Archive nonsense was funny before. Now it's just obtuse." When Jon doesn't bite back, she heaves a theatrical sigh. "*Fine*. As usual, I would offer you a quicker route, but you'd be something of an allergen in my corridors."

Jon flips her off over his shoulder.

“*Rude*,” Helen calls after him. Apparently she’s recovered enough to goad him, because he can hear the smile creeping back into her voice. “Try not to get lost traipsing back through the Lonely, Archivist. I would *hate* to have to come in after you.”

Her laughter is still ricocheting inside his skull when he hears her door swing shut. Already, he can feel a headache blossoming in his temple.

Jon takes a moment to collect himself before he turns his back on the Panopticon and sets out into the wasteland once again.

Chapter End Notes

- Jon's dialogue for chapter 2 was taken from the statements in the following episodes, in order: MAG 011; 057; 103; 047; 008 (x2); 124; 057; 162; 160; 059; 139; 059; 139; 160.

- Helen's "There are exactly two roles..." quote is from MAG 166; Jon's "An eye can't see inside itself" quote is from MAG 164; Gerry's "the feeling that something, somewhere, is letting you suffer..." quote is from MAG 111.

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

Rift

Chapter Summary

In which Jon returns to Hill Top Road.

Chapter Notes

Or: Jon yeets himself into a hole in the ground, as he is wont to do.

Who's ready for some ~*time travel*~???

CWs for Chapter 3: some claustrophobia/Buried themes; some grief & loss stuff; a few more instances of casual misgendering (not malicious; just some wrong pronouns here and there due to the speaking-in-statements thing, but thought I'd mention it just in case); a single LORGE spider. Also, Jon gets to do one (1) swear, as a treat.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jon doesn't remember the hill being this steep.

Or maybe he's just winded from the long trek through the wasteland. He'd had to pass through a long stretch of territory fought over by the Buried and the Vast. The ground there was practically a minefield, pockmarked with sinkholes. They would start out as quicksand traps and suffocating tunnel entrances, only to be hollowed out into yawning chasms and cenotes, then ultimately collapsed all over again by a retaliation-minded Choke. It was an endless cycle of petty rivalry and animosity, and passing so near their battlegrounds left Jon breathless with a discordant mix of claustrophobia and agoraphobia.

Worse was when the Dark managed to sneak its way into the mix. Whether it was Too Close I Cannot Breathe or the Vast's abyss, the Dark could always find a way to exploit subterranean spaces – and it could never resist reaching out to needle at an Avatar of the Eye, no matter how inadvisable it was to cross the Archive these days.

As Jon drew closer to Hill Top Road, he left the warzone behind for a mostly featureless landscape punctuated with the occasional foxholes of the Slaughter and pockets of the

Forsaken's fog. Eventually those too gave way to a seemingly endless dust bowl of soot and ash – a sprawling domain claimed by the Lightless Flame.

The house at Hill Top Road is the only thing still standing in the midst of an immense expanse of Desolation-scorched earth. The charred terrain stops abruptly at the foot of the hill, a stark line demarcating the boundary between the Blackened Earth and the territory that Annabelle Cane has staked out as her own. Jon had half-expected an invisible barrier to stop him there as well – the last time he was here, Annabelle had forbidden him from returning – but there had been no resistance when he stepped over the border.

As he hikes up the incline now, he finds himself worrying over what that might mean. Is Annabelle expecting him, inviting him in? Is she simply tolerating his presence, curious to see what he's up to? Could he be powerful enough now that even she cannot stop him? Or is he once again wrapped up in the Web's machinations, doing *exactly* what the Mother of Puppets wants?

He shakes his head. *No.* He and Martin talked about this. There's no point in obsessing over the Web's motivations, letting the memory of Annabelle's statement paralyze him with indecision. Better to just… keep moving forward.

It's not like he has anything left to lose.

Jon continues up the hill, increasingly winded, his bad leg throbbing angrily, and he thinks to himself again: he really, *really* doesn't remember it being this steep.

Before long, he's standing at the threshold of the house at Hill Top Road. The dread permeating the place is just as palpable as he remembered.

He waits for the Distortion's inevitable appearance, determined not to let her startle him this time. As if on cue, a door creaks open on the ceiling above him. Without preamble, Helen lands noiselessly on her feet beside Jon and peers around curiously.

“Interesting,” she says with a hum. “I wondered whether Annabelle would let me in.”

So did Jon. Maybe he should be concerned about – *no.* He shuts down that train of thought before it can pull out of the station.

“You still haven’t explained what *exactly* you plan on doing here.”

Honestly, that’s mostly because Jon hasn’t figured it out yet, either. He only Knows that this is the way.

The Eye wants things to change – as much as it can be said to *want* anything. Setting the question of its sentience or lack thereof aside, at the Panopticon he had been able to Know things that the Beholding had previously withheld from him. He might be stronger than the other Avatars and monsters lurking about the world, but he’s not arrogant enough to believe he could overpower any of the Fears themselves. If the Ceaseless Watcher gives him access to knowledge, it’s because his Knowing will facilitate – or at least not inhibit – its actualization, which means that he must have the Eye’s… blessing, to be here? He shakes his head; he’s getting caught up on semantics again.

Point is: he Asked a question and – as usual – he was given a scrap of an answer and left to puzzle the rest out for himself. All he Knows for certain is what he wants to happen, and that this is where he needs to be in order to *make* it happen.

“Jonathan.” Helen says his name with a playful lilt and leans further into his personal space. “Are you going to share with the class?”

Without a word, he sidesteps around her and walks further into the house. In her statement, Anya Villette had mentioned a door under the stairs leading to the basement. The last time Jon was here, it was nowhere to be seen. He can only hope it’s there this time.

“What are you looking for?”

Jon drags one hand down his face and sighs. Having Helen tag along is like taking a road trip through hell with an easily bored and… well, *deeply annoying* child. Huh.

"I won't be ignored, Jon –"

Jon bristles, redirects his gaze, and stares daggers at her with a few more eyes than strictly necessary. *"Some magically appearing door.*"

"You aren't being very kind to me right now, you know."

Jon gives an irritated huff and continues forward through the entrance hall. He treads softly, all too aware of every subtle creak of a floorboard. He doesn't know why he's bothering muffling his footsteps. It doesn't matter how quiet he is; Annabelle will know – probably already knows – that he's here regardless. There's just something about the house that demands a certain amount of fearful reverence. Disturbing the silence just *feels* like a bad idea.

Helen doesn't appear to have the same concerns. In fact, it almost seems like she's going out of her way to announce their presence. *Of course.*

Jon catches a glimpse of the staircase as he rounds the corner and – yes, there's a door under the stairs. A plain, painted white door with a brass handle, otherwise unremarkable and entirely unassuming.

And yet…

As he tries to approach it, he finds himself rooted to the spot, overcome with a sense of trepidation. He feels his breath coming faster, shallower; feels the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. Every one of the Archive's eyes locks onto the doorknob and for a moment he *swears* he feels tiny, feather-light legs scurrying down his spine. He pulls his pack tight against him, using the physical weight of it to dampen the tactile hallucination.

“I hate it,” Helen says darkly. Jon jumps just slightly at the break in the silence, and a few of the Archive’s eyes suspend their rapt scrutiny of the door handle to glance in her direction. Her posture is tense where she stands, staring warily at the door as if it might lunge at them. Jon has never seen the Distortion look so… unsettled.

She’s right, though. The door is *wrong.* More than that, it’s the *exact* same flavor of wrongness that he felt the first time he saw *A Guest for Mr. Spider,* and again when he reached out to knock on the monster’s door.

Back then, he hadn’t known that the concept of *wrongness* could be broken down into so many distinct subtypes: the uncanny disquietude of the Stranger feels fundamentally different from the depths of the Coffin, the sensation of worms tunneling through flesh, the Distortion’s nonsensical corridors, the Lonely’s suffocating fog.

The pull of the Web is in a class of its own, and the sight of the door in front of him drops him right back into the memory of the day he opened the book – the day he took the first step on the winding path that led him, inevitably, to this exact moment. It’s such a fitting parallel, he wouldn’t be surprised if it was orchestrated down to the finest detail. He knows the Web plays a long game, but precisely *how much* of what has happened was in perfect accordance with the Web’s plans? What even *is* the Web’s –

No. Stop fixating on the Spider, he reprimands himself for the umpteenth time this… day? Whatever; it’s not important. He forces his legs to move.

“You’re sticking your hand in a bear trap, I hope you know.”

“I knew opening the door was a stupid thing to do,” Jon says, feigning nonchalance. *“So I opened the door.”*

Helen breathes a surprised laugh. “Was that a *joke?”*

“The idea that this is all some grand cosmic joke,” Jon rattles off drily, *“thousands of us running around spreading horror and sabotaging each other pointlessly while these impossible unknowing things just lurk out there, feeding off the misery we caused –”*

“Terrible.” Helen groans and puts her head in her hands. “Here I was, ready to compliment you on *finally* finding a sense of humor, and you have to ruin the moment with – with *existentialist brooding*.”

Jon chuckles quietly to himself and takes another step forward.

“Wait.” Helen reaches one long-fingered hand in Jon’s direction, then falters and pulls back. For a moment, she seems to wrestle with whether or not to continue. “What’s behind the door?”

“A scar in reality –”

“*Yes*, I know about the rift. What do you expect to find in it? An answer? An escape? A means of suicide?”

“A metaphysical quirk of this new reality’s divorce from the traditional concept of time.”

Jon pauses, chewing on his bottom lip as he looks inward and browses through his catalog.

“It bends and twists and returns to what it was,” he settles on eventually.

“I told you not to use my words.” Helen gives him a warning look, but it’s fleeting, because a moment later his meaning sinks in and she huffs out a short laugh of disbelief. “Wait – wait, wait, wait. You think you can… what, turn back time?”

Jon grimaces and makes a noncommittal seesawing motion with one hand.

“…could emerge back into the world that she remembered.”

Helen starts laughing in earnest now. “You think you can *time travel?”*

Jon just shrugs, unashamed. He knows he *should* feel embarrassed – back when he first took the position as Head Archivist, he would have scoffed at anyone making such a suggestion – but at this point, is it any more unrealistic than anything else that’s happened?

“Alright,” Helen says, stifling another giggle, “I’ll grant you that there’s a rift in space and time. People have traveled through it before.”

Jon gives an enthusiastic nod. After her encounter with the crack in the house's foundation, Anya Villette had found herself temporally displaced. What would stop Jon from also –

“However,” Helen continues, “what makes you think you’ll just rewind your position on *this* timeline? It could just take you to a parallel world, leaving this one behind to suffer and decay. Would you abandon what remains of humanity like that?”

Seeing as Anya Villette appeared to have also been *spatially* displaced, Jon has already considered this possibility. Helen probably knows that, too – she’s well-acquainted with his tendency to overthink things. She’s just trying to tap into his chronic self-loathing, demoralize him, make him doubt his own perceptions. It’s a familiar pattern, one Jon used to submit to far too easily.

“...better than staying here with this strange woman.”

“Ouch.” Helen brings a hand to her chest in mock offense. “You’re being awfully cruel today.”

Jon flashes an entirely unapologetic smile.

“I was being serious, you know.” A knowing mischief creeps into Helen’s eyes. “You’ve always been selfish, but would you *really* run away from your mistakes, save yourself and damn the rest?”

Unfortunately for Helen, she’s arrived too late to this particular debate. Jon already spent the entire trip here berating himself and second-guessing his conclusions, and he’s just about gotten it out of his system for the time being. Self-recrimination as an inoculation against the Distortion – now *there’s* a concept, he thinks wryly.

“Do you honestly believe you deserve to escape an apocalypse that *you* brought about?”

God, she’s persistent.

“Now there’s only one thing I have left that I value,” he says simply. *“That I love. And I cannot lose him.*”

It’s the truth: the final deciding factor for him was, as it so often is, Martin.

“You would potentially forsake this entire world just to reverse your own loss?”

“There was nothing left to save.”

It never gets easier to admit it out loud, but that doesn’t change the truth of it. This world is already forsaken. Humanity is dying out, slowly but surely, and Jon harbors a guilty feeling of relief that their torment will not be eternal after all. As far as he can See, there’s no way for him to save the ones who remain. There never was.

His power was never meant to *help* anyone. For a long time, the only action within his grasp was to *hurt* – and so, he went after those who deserved to be hurt, because the only other option was doing nothing at all. But seeking revenge never saved anyone, never even made *himself* feel any better. If anything, it only made him feel emptier, more and more alienated from whatever human part of him still lingered – and that was a very dangerous place to be.

And when he and Martin decided together that he needed to slow down, to maintain some distance between himself and the Eye? Well… nothing substantial changed in the slightest. He didn't get any *worse*, but he also didn't get better. The world continued to suffer just as much as if he were to sit down and take no action at all. Nothing he did or did not do made any impact whatsoever.

He Knows intimately that he cannot banish the Entities from this world as long as one person remains to feel fear. Once that last person dies, there will be no one left to save. Hell, depending on how human he still is by that time, he may very well *be* that last person, and the Dread Powers will just have to ration him. And why shouldn't they? They've all had a taste of him more than once. He's an unfinished meal. They could just resume hacking away at him, demanding their respective pounds of flesh one after the other until nothing remains – until finally, mercifully, the Fears themselves would wither and die as well. He just doesn't want to consider how long that could take – *no*. Best not to dwell on it.

The point is, there is no future for this world. There is nothing left for him to do here. His only hope is to prevent all of this from coming to pass in the first place, and this… this is the only lead he has. And besides, Martin –

"You do realize that you have a *vanishingly* small chance of seeing him again, don't you?"

"I decided to take a risk and try it anyway."

Helen looks put out at his easy dismissal, but she really ought to know better by now. He might be chronically plagued by self-hate and a visceral fear of being controlled, but Martin is his anchor in more ways than one. Their relationship is proof of Jon's own capacity for free will, and his decision to go after Martin in the Lonely remains one of the only things he's done where he's never once wondered whether he made the right choice. He doesn't think he's ever been more confident about anything than he is about their love for each other, even if he doesn't always feel like he deserves it. Helen really couldn't pick a worse seed with which to sow self-doubt.

When she sees that Jon isn't taking the bait, she changes tack.

“And assuming this scheme somehow works as you hope it does, and doesn’t just get you shunted to some hellish pocket dimension – which it almost certainly will – you do realize that your little scene with Jonah Magnus will mean nothing, don’t you? This future will be erased, he will not suffer for eternity – he won’t even remember that it was ever a possibility.”

“For all her anger, there was no thirst for revenge in the Archivist, only an eagerness to expunge an infection that had gone unnoticed for too long.”

“Then why bother confronting him? I *know* it wasn’t for closure – if you were at all capable of letting go or moving on, you would never have been a candidate for the Beholding in the first place, and we wouldn’t be here now.” Jon just barely manages to not flinch at that. Luckily, Helen doesn’t seem to notice that she struck a nerve, instead staring up at the ceiling in contemplation, as if trying to decipher Jon’s motivations on her own. “So, why? All those messy emotions it dredged up, and for what – the drama of it all?”

“I live for the monologue,” he deadpans.

“Jonathan!” Helen gapes at him in exaggerated shock. “Was that *another* joke?”

She could stand to tone down the condescension, Jon thinks. It isn’t his fault if people overlook his sense of humor just because they never think to listen for it.

“Are you *certain* about this, Archivist? You have a history of reaching these points of no return and choosing the worst imaginable path.”

Here, at the very end of things, the Distortion just can’t resist one last chance at undermining his confidence. Despite the cockiness underlying her taunt, Helen has a hungry, almost pleading look in her eye – desperate, like everything else in this place that feeds on fear, for scraps in the midst of a famine that will never be remedied.

Jon reaches out and grips the doorknob with one hand.

“Even the end of the world can’t stop you throwing yourself on a grenade. Can’t say I’m surprised. I’m not following you in there, though.”

“Thank heaven for small mercies, I suppose.”

“I am *trying* to have a heartfelt goodbye, Jonathan,” Helen says, not sounding sincere in the slightest. “I doubt this will go as you hope it will, but I’m fairly certain that no matter what happens, I won’t be seeing you again. I won’t wish you luck, but… it *will* be interesting to see whether one of your half-assed plans might pan out for once – not that they ever have gone according to plan.” When Jon’s resolve remains strong, Helen sighs – and this time, her disappointment does sound genuine. “Well, if you’re *sure*…” She trails off, giving him one last hopeful look – once last chance to fall apart under her skillful denigrations – before her shoulders slump in defeat.

Not content to leave it at that, though, she does offer one last parting shot: “Do say hello to the Spider for me, won’t you?”

An involuntary shudder courses down Jon’s spine as he remembers Anya Villette’s statement – the massive spider legs reaching up to pull her into the crack in the foundation – and compares it with his own memory of the book, the door, and the monster lurking within. Helen breathes a contented sigh at his ripple of unease – basically a snack for her, at Jon’s expense. *Fine.* She can have that last little morsel of fear from him, as a parting gift.

“Sometimes you just have to leave,” Jon says firmly, turning the handle. *“Even if what’s on the other side scares you.”*

And, oh, *it does.*

Miraculously, Helen allows him to have the final word. As he pushes open the door to the basement, he hears Helen’s door creak open in unison. By the time he’s staring down the stairs into the dark, her door has snapped shut and popped out of existence.

The staircase pitches down, down, down, stretching far deeper than it should. It's too dark to see much of anything, and it takes a full minute of descent until Jon notices that there's a slight curve to it. With every step, the air grows warmer and more stifling. The revolting sensation of walking through cobwebs becomes a constant, but any time he reaches up to brush away the web clinging to him, he feels nothing but his own bare skin.

A few minutes in, his bad leg starts twinging again, and he holds on to the wall to steady himself. Before long, his mind begins to wander to the horrifying possibility that the staircase is interminable, and he's overcome by an image of a funnel web spider waiting patiently for unsuspecting prey. He tries to push the thought away. *Just keep moving.*

Between the lack of visibility and being lost in his own head, he doesn't notice the sharp turn in the staircase until he plows right into the wall, a sharp pain erupting in his left shoulder from the collision. He throws one hand back to steady himself and only barely manages to stay on his feet, his bad leg protesting as he throws his weight into it. After briefly taking inventory of himself and experimentally putting weight on his leg again – painful, but not unbearable – he gropes blindly for the wall again and uses it to guide himself forward, more slowly this time. It isn't long before the stone of the wall gives way to cool, damp earth, and he shivers with the memory of the Buried.

After several more sharp, nearly 90-degree twists and turns, a faint glow starts to permeate the darkness. A few minutes later, the staircase opens up into a large, dimly-lit space, garlanded with spider silk. The ceiling, walls, and floor are composed of tightly-packed dirt, and Jon has to fight back a rush of claustrophobic panic at the thought of being surrounded on all sides by the crushing earth. It's short-lived, as it's crowded out by a much deeper, more primal fear when he sees the fissure in the ground ahead.

It's a repulsive, crooked thing, oozing with a pervasive, tangible feeling of *wrongness.* It should not be there. It *cannot* be there. And yet there it is, boldly *existing* where it has no right or reason to be: a gnawing, open, inflamed wound in the fabric of reality, pulling him toward it like a black hole. It's a compulsion stronger than the coffin, an abomination more uncanny than the Stranger, a malice deeper than any Dark, an inevitability on par with Terminus itself.

Jon *hates* it. At his first glimpse of it, every one of the Archive's eyes fly open, greedily drinking in the oppressive presence of something so unfamiliar and anomalous, leeching off of Jon's terror as he beholds it. The scrutiny is fleeting, though, as the sight of it turns corrosive and blistering; all at once, the eyes shrink away and retreat, like a school of fish

spotting a bird of prey swooping down for a meal. It takes some of the edge off, having fewer eyes with which to see the thing, but it still weighs him down with dread and revulsion.

He doesn't know how long he's stood there, staring unblinkingly at the fault line, before he senses a presence – something colossal and hungry and *wrong,* malevolence and foreboding given physical form – climbing inexorably toward him. He hears a faint rustling, the whisper of tiny avalanches of dirt scraped loose and sent sliding down the walls of the crevice. He knows exactly what to expect, and still he isn't prepared when the first of the spider's legs peeks up over the lip of the fissure.

How is it that after a lifetime to process a childhood trauma, it still throttles his heart and squeezes the air from his lungs at the mere thought of it? How is it that, despite being the most formidable thing in this world outside of Fear itself, he feels as small and helpless now as he did on the day he met his first of many monsters? Why is he just *standing* here, letting those hairy, spindly limbs hover and curl around him like an enormous clawed hand, waiting for a fate that is as unknowable as it is inevitable?

Focus, Jon thinks to himself. *Listen to the quiet.*

He slowly reaches into his jacket and breathes a sigh of relief as his fingers close around the notebook safeguarded there. It's Martin's, full of poems and sketches and stream-of-consciousness journal entries. Jon has had it with him for a long time now, but he's never been able to bring himself to look inside it. Martin would occasionally share its contents with him – mostly completed poems, and only rarely works in progress, as he was always self-conscious about his creative process – but Jon doesn't want to accidentally see something that Martin would have preferred to keep to himself. Martin might not be beside him right now, but he still deserves to have his privacy respected.

Still, for Jon, just having it with him is a physical reminder of his anchor, and running his thumb over the cover grounds him in the present. He closes his eyes and looks inward.

The Archive gropes blindly for something solid amidst the noise, some elemental truth to serve as a starting point in the chaotic tangle choking this place. The edges of his mind brush against thread after thread and none of them are what he's looking for. They stick to him, filling his head with cotton, rendering him sluggish and confused, obfuscating his sight. The Spider watches as he flails, becoming more and more snarled in the web.

"I closed my eyes and remembered in as much detail and with as much love as I could muster in my despair," he whispers to himself, anchoring himself in the truth of the statement. He swallows a terrified whimper as something coarse and fuzzy brushes against his face, and he weaves a command into his next words: *"Eventually, I opened my eyes again –"*

The Archive obeys, hundreds of eyes materializing on his skin and blinking open in the space around him, grotesque satellites of varying sizes all seizing on a single question, and suddenly he can See –

There.

A single thread, out of place among the rest, pulled taut and leading down into the deep gloom of the chasm. He spares a brief thought as to its origin point – *Is its anchor here, now, or do its roots begin on the other side?* – before silencing it. It's not a question that needs answering right now. The Beholding objects; Jon reflexively shuts it down and takes an aggravated swipe at the nearest cluster of eyes he can reach, like swatting at a swarm of mosquitoes. He doesn't think it actually does anything concrete, but when they disperse it brings him a small measure of satisfaction all the same.

He gives an experimental tug on the thread and – it *feels* right. That's good, right? Well, he supposes it *could* be the Web trying to trick him into –

God, he's like a dog with a bone. He could be trapped in a burning building and find part of his mind wandering off to idly ponder the melting point of steel –

...around 1370 °C for carbon steel; between 1400 and 1530°C for stainless steel, depending on the specific alloy and grade…

– which, yes, he has done. It's a good way to dissociate from a crisis. Unfortunately, it's *also* a good way to get killed, and the giant spider is *still there, Jonathan, focus.*

He holds fast to the thread – *make a path for yourself, tune it to the frequency you need –*

"Everything about being with him felt so natural that when he told me he loved me," he tells himself, louder this time, *"it only came as a surprise to realize that we hadn't said it already."*

– and he follows it, stepping carefully around and between the spider's legs. He has no idea why it isn't attacking him – *what if this is exactly what Annabelle – no*. He shakes his head as if it will jostle the thought loose. *Just be thankful for it and* keep moving *before the damn thing changes its mind*.

Moments or hours or perhaps days later, he's standing at the precipice of the fissure and looking down. Several eyes are riveted on the massive hairy form poised above him, but most are staring into the unknowable darkness with a gnawing, longing fascination. He stands frozen in place, torn between an overwhelming urge to flee and an overpowering need to Know what's down there: something new, something fresh, something *different* – any reprieve at all from the excruciating monotony of this nightmare world.

The spider shifts above him. It's now or never. He has nothing to lose, and if there's any chance at all of changing this doomed future – of seeing Martin again…

"Sometimes you just have to leave," he reminds himself, shutting his human eyes tight, one hand clutching the notebook and the other clenching into a fist until his fingernails cut into his palm. *"Even if what's on the other side scares you."*

He takes one last deep breath, thinks of Martin – *safe hands, warm eyes, gentle touch* – and he takes a leap of faith.

Jon can't see anything. He can't *See,* either. There is an incessant, high-pitched whine screaming in his ears and drowning out his thoughts. When he moves to put his hands over his ears, he realizes all at once that he can't feel his body. He has no sense of up or down, no fingers to flex, no breath to hold, and – and he can't See.

It's… terrifying. It's liberating. It *hurts*, but in the same way that his first gulp of fresh air hurt after three days asphyxiating in the Buried.

He doesn't know how long he floats there in that near-senseless limbo, but between one moment and the next a blanket of fog drops over him and the shrill static is muffled. Through the haze, he can just barely make out a voice, coming from so far away – like he's drowning, and someone is speaking to him from above the water's surface. He drifts and listens in a daze as the voice cuts in and out.

"– just – thought I'd – by. Check in – how you're –"

It's a nice voice.

"– really need you –"

A *safe* voice.

"– Jon."

Wait.

"– bad. I – how much longer we can –"

Wait, it's – that's Martin's voice.

"We – *I* need you."

It's Martin. *Martin!*

Martin is here, he's *here* – Jon doesn't know where *here* is, but it doesn't matter, because *Martin* is here, and – and Jon is so overwhelmed with euphoria that he isn't actually processing what's being said. *Calm down, focus – focus on the words –*

"And I – I know that you're not –"

Oh.

"I know there's no way to –"

Oh, no.

"But we need you, Jon."

All at once, Jon knows where – *when* he is.

"Jon, please, just – please."

No. No, no, no, *no* –

"If – if there's anything left in you that can still see us, or –"

Martin, I'm here!

"– or some power that you've still got, or –"

I'm here, I'm here, ***I'm here*** *–*

"– or, or something, anything, please! Please."

Martin's voice breaks, and Jon's heart fractures with it.

"I – I can't –"

Jon can just barely make out the buzz of a phone and – *oh*.

"I'm – I'm actually with him now."

Martin!

"You were right." A pause, and a heavy sigh. "I – will they be safe?"

Peter Lukas. It's Peter Lukas. Peter Lukas is still alive, Peter Lukas is hunting Martin, Peter Lukas wants to feed him to the Lonely, Peter Lukas is –

"Okay. Okay, I'll do it."

Martin, don't –

"Yeah. Sure thing."

Martin!

“I’m sorry.”

Jon tries to scream, to reach out, to do anything at all, but he doesn’t have a body and he doesn’t have a voice and he can’t *See* –

“Goodbye, Jon.”

Martin, look at me! Hear me, please - ***see me!***

He tries to thread a command through the words, but the compulsion doesn't come through, and -

Jon hears the rustle of clothing as Martin stands to leave, followed by the soft click of the door as it closes behind him.

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

me: i could go into some long-winded exposition about the space-time continuum
also me: OR i can just handwave it and say It's The Power Of Love, Don't Even Worry About It

anyway, my gay little heart knows what it's about.

- Jon’s dialogue is taken from the statements in the following episodes: MAG 146; 054; 151; 139; 168; 101; 134; 010; 037; 008; 019; 167; 108; 103; 146; 048; 013; 146.

- Martin's dialogue at the end is from the S4 trailer.

- Jon gets some original verbal dialogue starting next chapter. Thought I'd mention it just in case anyone is getting tired of the Archive-speak (though there will still be some of that). :P

- Psst, if you want to read a detour about Jon and Martin's talk about Annabelle and free will and Not Obsessing Over The Web, I wrote that here. (I'm linking it here because it actually originally started as part of this fic but I decided to make it its own thing because my ADHD brain ran with it and it was waaaaay too much of a tangent sdsdhshgh)

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

Interlude

Chapter Summary

Jon takes a tour through some shared nightmares for the first time since the world ended.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a bit more lighthearted than the last few. I mean, it's still canon-typical Jon Can't Catch a Break, but with, like, some bright spots.

CWs for Chapter 4: description of a panic attack; blood & injury (within a dream); eye horror; canon-typical worms; canon-typical horror/nightmare imagery (think MAG 121: Far Away).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Calm down, Jon tells himself, quaking with panic. *Breathe. Four seconds in, hold seven seconds, eight seconds out. Just –*

Wait. He has no body. He has no lungs. How – how is he supposed to breathe with no *lungs?* He can't – he can't –

Stop, stop, stop – shut up and think about it, he reprimands himself.

No lungs means he's not hyperventilating. No heart means there are no palpitations. He still has a body, he's just – disconnected from it right now. And even if he wasn't, during his first coma he had no pulse or respiration, so – so there's no way he's experiencing the physical symptoms of a panic attack right now. He's imagining it.

Forget about breathing for now. Think about – think about the positives –

His plan worked. Sort of. Yes, he'd hoped the rift would take him back to the very beginning – before he started reading statements to that damn tape recorder, before he'd started compelling answers without even realizing he was doing it, before Prentiss and paranoia and burned bridges and the Circus and Sasha and *Tim* –

Oh, God. If he could have showed up just a few months earlier, he could have stopped –

Stop, he thinks, imagining Martin talking him through his racing thoughts, like he used to do whenever Jon got like this. *Think about what you* can *change.*

This is still an improvement on the future he left behind. The world hasn't ended yet, and now he has an advantage that he didn't have last time. He knows who Elias really is, what his plans are, and all the little traps that he set along the path.

Jon can still stop Jonah's Ritual.

Okay. What else?

He might not have been able to prevent Daisy from ending up in the Buried, but he can still save her, just like he did before.

And he knows more about Peter's intentions this time, knows about the Extinction and the extent to which Peter is exaggerating its imminent threat. He… he can keep Martin from succumbing to the Lonely.

…can't he?

Yes. Yes, he can. He won't entertain any alternative. He knows Martin much more intimately now, knows *himself* more intimately. The first time around, it took Jon far too long to identify how he felt about Martin, to find the right word for it, to admit it to himself – and then, it took him even longer to confess it out loud. He was almost too late.

There is the pressing question of how to approach Martin now. It depends on how soon Jon can wake up and how much of a stranglehold the Lonely has on Martin by then. Lonely or not, though, he probably won't be receptive to a love confession at this point in their timeline. From Martin's perspective, it would seem to come from nowhere. He wouldn't believe it. As difficult as it is to accept, Jon knows that he can't corner Martin with a declaration of love and expect to pick up where they left off.

But Jon also knows what words used to comfort Martin and how he liked to be held and where his boundaries lay. Jon had painstakingly learned the best gestures to convey his affection – how best to help Martin *believe* that he is loved, that he deserves to be cared for, that he doesn't have to be lonely. Hopefully it will be enough. Hopefully those things are still true, present tense. And if they aren't, Jon will unlearn it all and relearn how best to be there for Martin here in the past – present, now.

Jon is feeling calmer already. *Okay, good. Go on.*

This is before he started to actively hunt for statements. It's too late for him to save the ones who came before – and even though they came to the Institute willingly, and even though he didn't know at the time he took their statements that the nightmares were real, he still feels guilty about it – but now he knows better, and he knows he can stop.

He will not take live statements this time. He won't. It doesn't matter what it does to him, he just – he won't do it.

Keep going. What about the others?

Jon isn't sure exactly what the date is, but based on Martin's visit just now - *his last visit*, Jon thinks with a pang - Jon is definitely too late to warn them about the Flesh attack. That means the Slaughter likely has a strong hold on Melanie by now - but if Jon can wake up earlier than he did before, maybe he can save her before she gets any worse. Maybe this time he can find a better way to approach the bullet situation. Maybe. She probably still hates him, but it's worth a try.

He can warn Basira about the true motives behind Elias' false leads. Last time, Basira felt like she had to carry everything on her shoulders. Maybe this time, he can give her the support she needs - if she lets him. Maybe this time he can earn her trust again. Maybe this time he'll even *deserve* to be trusted.

And maybe… maybe he can even salvage his relationship with Georgie – assuming she's open to the idea, that is.

All of that is bound to be easier said than done, but at least it's a starting point.

Now if only he can figure out how to wake up.

Time has even less meaning here than it did in the apocalypse. Jon can't Know or even guess at the passing of time as he drifts aimless in the void. He splits his time evenly between panicking, talking himself down from the panic, planning, and sleeping. Or – something *like* sleep, anyway. It's more like his mind just goes blank, and it's – rather nice, actually. It's the first dreamless rest he's gotten in years, even if it is under such grim circumstances.

It doesn't last, though. One moment he is nothing and nowhere at all, and the next he's in a very familiar graveyard surrounded by very, *very* familiar fog.

So much for dreamless sleep, he thinks. A moment later, the muffled sound of crying reaches him through the mist.

He waits, then, to be overtaken by the nauseating sensation of being puppeted. It was a familiar routine. The dream would string him along, stopping him before each victim in turn. He would be compelled to behold their torment, unable to flee or speak or even close his eyes. It never got any easier, but at some point it had become his new normal, and during his previous coma, after six months of the same endlessly looping nightmares, he did start to feel numb to it all.

During the apocalypse, though, he didn't sleep. He didn't dream. There was no need, not when the nightmare was all around him and he could See all of it at every moment. A creeping sense of dread washes over him at the prospect of returning to *this* again every time he tries to sleep, and he realizes that the old numbness has worn off. He isn't looking forward to cultivating it all over again – and he doesn't know if he can take months of this nonstop a second time.

As he stands there lost in his own head, time ticks by second by second until finally he notices that he's waiting for a compulsion that… doesn't seem to come. It *never* takes this long for the dream to commandeer his body.

Jon decides to take a step forward, and his legs surprise him by obeying. *That's* new. He stares blankly at his feet until another choked sob, louder this time, cuts through the fog. He cautiously takes a step toward the sound, and then another, and another, expecting the entire time for the dream to rip his agency away from him again. It doesn't. He finds himself at the lip of the grave, as usual – but for the first time, he came here of his own volition.

When he looks down, he sees her sprawled at the bottom of her lonely plot, one hand scrabbling weakly against the earthen wall. The skin on her arms is pallid and covered in gooseflesh; her face is covered in dirt, but where her tears have eroded watery tracks down her cheeks, the skin underneath is ashen. She looks… grey, colorless, as washed out as the mist clinging to her. The moment she sees him, a soft, broken wail clambers up her throat.

Naomi Herne.

"Why are you doing this?" Naomi croaks weakly. It's a refrain that Jon has heard time and time again, and he feels his heart clench painfully in his chest – or at least, a convincing psychosomatic simulation of it. "Why won't you just *leave me alone?"*

"I'm so sorry, Naomi," Jon whispers.

They both flinch simultaneously. Naomi flings herself bodily against the wall and Jon jolts backward into thin air so abruptly that he loses his balance and ends up in a heap on the muddy ground.

He's never, ever been allowed to speak in this place. Years of apologies have sat heavily on his tongue, piling up and crowding his throat with every live statement he consumed, and never *once* has he been able to let them out. And more than that, it's – it's *his* voice. It's not the Archive, it's just… it's just *Jon.* Staring ahead in stunned silence, he brings one hand to his throat and lets it rest there.

"I… I…" Naomi's hoarse voice drifts up into the fog, confused and frightened.

Limbs still trembling, Jon crawls over to the edge of the grave and looks down again. Naomi watches him, her eyes wide and pale and wet.

"You… you spoke to me."

"I…" Jon clears his throat uncertainly. "I – yes, I – I suppose I did."

"You've never spoken to me."

"Yes," Jon murmurs, massaging his throat again.

"Why?" When Jon doesn't reply, Naomi smacks her palm against the muddy wall of her plot and raises her voice. *"Why?"*

"I –" Jon shakes his head and tries to corral his thoughts into some semblance of order. The fog in his brain just might be as thick as the haze choking the cemetery. "This is the first time I've been allowed to speak."

"That's not good enough!" Naomi shouts, rising to her knees now. "Do you realize – do you know how long it's been, how many times I've been forced to sit here, watching you just *stare* down at me with… and – and how many times have I asked, how many times have I *begged* for you to just – just say something, or look away, or do *anything* else other than – than *watch* me?"

“I…” Jon clears his throat again. “You gave me your statement on the thirteenth of January, 2016. I’m not sure what the exact date is right now, but – I think it’s December? 2017.”

“Almost *two years!”* Naomi’s voice cracks. “I can count in double digits the number of decent nights’ sleep I’ve gotten in *two years*.”

“I know,” Jon says quietly. “I know, and I’m – I’m so, so sorry.”

Naomi looks like she wants to rail against him some more, but she seems speechless.

The apologies are throwing her off. She wants to scream at a monster, and you’re robbing her of the opportunity –

Jon had forgotten how strong the Knowing is in this place. He swats at the nearest group of eyes hovering around him, and the influx of information is interrupted as they scatter and fade out. Whether he successfully distracted the Eye or simply redirected his own attention, he doesn’t know, but either way, he finds the quiet – at least for the moment.

Naomi watches the movement with utter bemusement, then schools her expression back into defiance and suspicion.

“So what changed?”

“I’m… not sure, exactly. This is the first time this has happened, and…” Jon pauses, suddenly feeling self-conscious staring down at Naomi from six feet above. “Do you want –” He cuts himself off. He’s going to have to get used to dancing around questions again. “I can help you out of there. If – if you’d like.”

“Why?” She sounds less incensed now, but fire still simmers just below the surface of the word.

“I’ve – I’ve wanted to this entire time,” Jon says haltingly. “I did try, at first, when all of this started. I tried to reach down to you, but I – the dream has never let me move or talk or – or *blink* before.”

Naomi stares at him with narrowed eyes, arms crossed over her chest defensively. “I don’t trust you.”

“I… yes, I suppose that’s fair.”

Naomi falls silent. Jon watches her gaze flit nervously from eye to eye to eye as they blink open in the open air out of nothing and then pop out of existence again like bubbles, an endless shuffle of Watchers of varying sizes. The light they emit bounces off the water molecules in the air around them, illuminating the fog and bathing the entire area in a sickening greenish glow.

“Here, let me try…” Jon trails off, closes his human eyes and focuses on shutting the others, hoping to make himself appear just a little less monstrous. At one point he manages to pare their numbers down to just a couple dozen before all at once several dozen more blink open again, every one of them immediately swiveling to fix him with a reproachful stare.

He’s so preoccupied with glaring back at each of them in turn that he jerks when a hysterical giggle bubbles up out of Naomi’s throat. Now it’s Jon’s turn to look bemused. When his human eyes meet Naomi’s, she laughs harder. She still sounds tear-choked, but Jon can feel the fright draining away from her.

“Naomi…?” Jon tilts his head slightly, brow furrowing in consternation.

Naomi wipes tears from the corners of her eyes as she tries to catch her breath. “It’s – nothing, nothing. You just… you looked so put out, and it’s just – it’s hard to feel intimidated by a monster when it’s pouting like a toddler chasing peas around a plate with a fork.”

Jon feels his face heat, and then suddenly a quiet, involuntary chuckle is clawing its way up and out of his throat as well. It's just – the tenor of her teasing is so, so reminiscent of Martin.

"Sure," he says, his voice taking on the same teary-and-tickled tinge, "bully the penitent monster."

Naomi stifles another giggle and doubles over, shivering with the surreal hilarity of it all. Both of them stay like that for a long moment, fighting back the bizarre combination of tears and laughter. Jon can't remember the last time he's laughed like this, and the realization brings another swell of tears to his eyes.

Eventually, Naomi stands on wobbly legs and rubs her eyes, carelessly smearing the moisture and dirt on her cheeks into a thin paste.

"Well?" She stands on tiptoe and stretches one hand up toward him. "Are you going to help me out of here?"

With a surge of gratitude – he's being allowed to *help* someone for once – Jon stretches out flat against the ground and reaches down. A single eye sprouts uninvited on his palm and he scowls at it until it melts into his skin and sinks out of sight. He looks back at Naomi, expecting fear and disgust, but she just looks fascinated and more than a little amused. When he extends his hand again, she reaches back. Their fingertips just barely brush and he scoots closer, head and shoulders leaning over the edge until Naomi's clammy hand is clutched firmly in his.

"Are you actually going to be able to pull me out? You don't look like you have any upper body strength."

"Every day with the schoolyard bullying," Jon sighs, reaching out a second hand to grip her wrist more firmly. She takes his cue and does the same, clasping his wrist with her other hand until it aches. "It's a dream, Naomi. I don't think physical laws matter much."

She begins to pull herself up, her bare toes digging into the wall as she clambers up. She slips a few times, and Jon grimaces as he takes more of her weight.

“Seems like the dream’s decided your noodle arms are just as useless here as they are in the real world,” Naomi says with a strained grunt.

“Watch it, I might just drop you.” Jon panics as the retort leaves his mouth and he hastens to add, “I’m – I’m kidding, I wouldn’t – that was in poor taste, I’m sorry –”

“I know,” Naomi says with a breathless laugh. “Are you always this awkward?”

With one final burst of energy, she heaves herself upward and Jon shuffles back, pulling her over the edge until she has enough leverage to drag herself up the rest of the way. They both lay there for a few minutes, waiting for the adrenaline to fade.

“Thank you,” Naomi murmurs shakily.

“The least I can do, right?”

“The absolute least.”

Jon breathes out a tired chuckle. When he realizes that one hand is still linked with one of Naomi’s, he starts to pull away, but she tightens her grasp and the look in her eyes turns panicked.

“Please,” she blurts out and then looks away, embarrassed. “I’m – I’m not trying to make it weird, I just –”

“It’s okay,” Jon says quietly, and gives her hand a reassuring squeeze. “I understand. We can stay like this for now.”

Naomi nods gratefully. She still looks a bit mortified – the color is returning to her cheeks, Jon notes – but more than anything else, she seems relieved. They spend the next few minutes in a slightly awkward but mostly companionable silence.

“I really am sorry, Naomi –”

“You said.”

“– but I don’t know how to stop this from happening.” When Naomi doesn’t reply, Jon continues: “I – I promise that if I find out, I’ll do whatever I can to stop it. I just – I wanted to say that, if this is a fluke – if next time we find ourselves here, I’m back to…” Jon hesitates for a moment. “Remember your anchor.”

“My… anchor?”

“The first time you got lost in the fog – think about how you found your way out.”

“Evan,” Naomi whispers, and Jon nods.

“Next time you find yourself here, if you’re alone, or – or if I’m… unresponsive, remember your anchor. And - and it doesn't have to be Evan, it can be anyone or anything that tethers you to the world you came from. I don’t know if it will lead you out of the fog in a dream – it might not even allow you to leave the grave – but it should… it should help you remember that you're not lost. That this is a dream, and you will wake up from it.” He swallows and closes his human eyes. “That the fog doesn’t actually go on forever, even if… even if sometimes it might seem like it.”

Naomi is silent for a long moment before she speaks again.

“Will you stay with me until I wake up?”

“I – I – yes?” Jon stammers, astonished by the idea that she’d want to willingly pass the time in his company. “Yes, if you – if that’s what you want.”

“I wouldn’t have asked otherwise,” Naomi says. She rolls her eyes, but it comes off more as indulgent than annoyed. “Keep talking?”

Jon opens his mouth – and promptly closes it again. He’s never been a great conversationalist, especially with people he doesn’t know well, and it’s not like he’s had much chance to practice for… a long time. Not since he lost Martin. There was Helen, of course, but their chats were seldom rewarding, even before Jon was reduced to speaking in statements.

Apparently Naomi senses his struggle, because she fills the silence for him. “Do you have an anchor?”

Jon is glad of the assistance. Answering questions – that’s something he can handle.

“Yes,” he responds, just a bit dreamily, fighting back a smitten half-smile. “Yes, I do.”

Naomi raises an eyebrow.

“I… can tell you about him, if you’d like?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Alright then.” Jon fidgets nervously; being open about this sort of thing doesn't come naturally to him. Where to even begin? It would be easier if he had a specific prompt. A question to answer. Or perhaps… “Statement of Jonathan Sims,” he says before he can think better of it, “regarding his anchor, and all the intricacies of being Seen.”

“Wow,” Naomi says flatly. “I take it he’s the one responsible for changing you from an arrogant prick to a besotted puppy?”

“He… *may* have had something to do with it,” Jon says, simultaneously fond and abashed. “He’s a poet and a hopeless romantic, and it may or may not have rubbed off on me. Now, do you want to hear a story or not?”

“Definitely, but I reserve the right to make fun of you when you’re done.”

“That seems like a fair deal, considering the past couple years.”

“I think so.” Naomi gives him an expectant look. “Well? Go on.”

“Well, his name is Martin K. Blackwood.” Jon doesn’t bother holding back his smile this time. “The ‘K’ doesn’t actually stand for anything – he just, and I quote, ‘liked the way it looked’…”

Once he's started, Jon needs no further prompting before he's rambling on about Martin. It takes him a few minutes to remember that Jonah might be listening in. He hadn’t been planning on mentioning the apocalypse to Naomi, but he reminds himself to be careful not to mention *any* major events that haven’t happened yet, anything that might hint at his foreknowledge of Jonah’s plans.

There *is* a risk of raising suspicion just by talking about Martin in such affectionate terms. At this point in his timeline the first time around, Jon was fully occupied with routinely having his life threatened – and then studiously refusing to process that ongoing complex trauma in any remotely healthy way. He didn’t exactly have the time or breathing room or emotional capacity to examine his developing feelings for Martin, and even if he had, he wouldn’t have been able to tolerate the vulnerability of admitting it to himself, let alone to Martin.

But Jonah can’t *always* be watching them; he has to assume that he misses out on things from time to time. He probably won’t think too hard on mundane slice-of-life moments involving tea and poetry and debates about what criteria should be used to identify a good cow, as long Jon is vague about the time frame and contextual details of each story. He avoids explicitly

putting a label on the nature of their relationship and tones down any particularly romantic interactions. In the end, he succeeds in sounding like he has a not-so-subtle crush on a coworker and is both too emotionally repressed to acknowledge it and too unobservant to realize that it's reciprocated. (It's… not a difficult act to pull off.)

Jon manages to get through several non-incriminating anecdotes like that before Naomi wakes up. He hopes he'll still have his voice the next time he sees her. It's… nice, to talk to another person after so long with only the Distortion to keep him company.

He stands and brushes himself off as well as he can, which isn't much. Resigning himself to the drying mud clinging to him, he steels himself and prepares to continue his well-traveled tour of the dreamscape.

Jon's first stop is Dr. Lionel Elliott's anatomy lab. Jon manages to snatch the apple away from him before either of them have to catch a glimpse of the molars hidden inside it, but it doesn't stave off the bone-crunching contortions that always dominate this part of the dream. It takes Jon some very long, very painful minutes to talk Elliott down from his fear long enough to redirect the dream's trajectory, and even longer to convince the man that he means him no harm.

Jon does eventually manage to coax him out of the dissection lab and into the hall – (*"I think sitting on the floor out there is preferable to staying in here with all the…"* – and here, Jon gestures at the nearest blood-spurting heart) – but they don't get very far into their conversation before Elliott wakes up.

They'll have to see each other again the next time Elliott sleeps, though. Jon can try again.

Next up is Tessa Winters, sat at her computer. She nearly has the keyboard to her lips before Jon manages to reach her. In his haste to stop the dream sequence, he overturns the table and sends the entire setup crashing to the floor, yanking the keyboard away from her for good measure. Tessa promptly drops to the ground and makes a grab for the nearest shard of glass from the broken monitor.

Unable to control her own body, she shoves the glass between her lips and crunches down on it before Jon can wrest it from her. When it slices into the roof of her mouth, an identical gash opens up in Jon's, and soon both of them have blood running down their throats. As Tessa reaches out a shaky hand to snatch up another piece, Jon catches her wrist.

"Tessa, listen to me – you don't have to do this anymore."

The look she gives him is a perfect mix of enraged and terrified, and she tries desperately to pull away.

"Tessa – *Tessa!"*

Shaking her head frantically, she shuts her eyes tight, sending tears streaming down her cheeks. Jon chokes a bit on the blood still pouring freely out of the cut in his mouth. He can only imagine what a sight he must be right now: covered in mud, teeth stained red, all those hungry eyes looking on. He's loath to use compulsion, but…

"Tessa, **look at me**."

She abruptly stops struggling and a glimmer of cognizance flares in her eyes. A moment later, she rips her hand away from his grip and backhands him across the face.

I probably deserved that, Jon thinks. He puts both of his hands up in a nonthreatening gesture and leans away from her, giving her space. He can at least feel the cut in his mouth healing now that the nightmare sequence is fading, but the taste of blood lingers on his tongue.

"What is *wrong* with you?" Tessa seethes. She spits blood onto the ground through her teeth, never once breaking eye contact with Jon. With his *human* eyes, he notes. "I've been having this dream for nearly a *year* and – and…"

“You… know that this isn’t just a dream.” It isn’t a question; Jon already Knows the answer.

“It’s a very *lucid* dream.” She’s clearly aiming for decisive, but Jon can detect the waver of uncertainty concealed underneath. Tessa looks away and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, painting a crimson streak across her skin.

“You don’t really think that, though,” Jon says gently. He could tell from the first time he met Tessa in her nightmares that she knew there was an element of the supernatural at play.

“Then what? You’re – you’re secretly a monster in disguise, siphoning off people’s ghost stories? Feeding on nightmares like some kind of – what, *dream vampire?”*

“I…” Jon frowns. “I’ve never heard it phrased that way, but I suppose? Sort of? I mean, I was – I was human once. When you first gave your statement, I hadn’t realized what I was becoming just yet. I was having nightmares like this, but back then I still thought they were just… bad dreams.”

“So why are you suddenly talking to me now?”

“The dream has never let me talk before. Usually I don’t have control of my body, I just get piloted around and made to… well, Watch.”

“And what, I’m supposed to feel *sorry* for you?”

“No, I – not at all, I just –” Jon sighs. “I’m answering your question. The reason I’m just now speaking to you is because this is the first time I've been able. I don’t intentionally bring you here. In fact, I hate coming here so much that I sleep the bare minimum amount just to avoid dreaming. But…” He falters, struggling to get the words out. “But it is *because* of me that you’re brought here, and so I – I owe you an apology.”

“Why?” Jon looks at her questioningly. “You’re saying you don’t bring me here, and that you didn’t know what would happen when you took my statement. So, what are you actually

apologizing for? Because you feel guilty, and you think saying sorry will make you feel better? That's not an apology, that's a cop-out."

Jon's first impulse is to deny it, but he stops himself, because that *is* the impression he's giving, isn't it?

"I do feel guilty," he admits, "but apologizing isn't going to make me feel better, trust me. I'm sorry because… like I said, even if I didn't expect or intend this specific outcome, it's still *because* of me that you're here. I need to take responsibility for that."

Jon gnaws on the inside of his cheek nervously, trying to organize his thoughts. Taking Tessa Winters' statement was, in retrospect, a watershed moment for him. He had taken several live statements by that point, but all the earlier statement givers had made their way to the Institute independently. (Well, except Helen – Jonah had confessed that he was the one to lead her to the Institute – but Jon didn't know that at the time.) Tessa was the first time Jon actively and knowingly brought someone to him – and he did it under false pretenses.

It's been eating away at him ever since that first nightmare they shared.

"The forum post that drew you to me," he says in a rush, "asking for statements."

"What about it?"

"I'd never solicited statements before then. People would just come to the Institute on their own."

"And?" Tessa fixes him with an intense look. "What changed?"

"Well, I… I had an ulterior motive in posting on tech savvy message boards specifically." Jon picks at his cuticles, human eyes carefully averted from Tessa's. "The laptop you helped me with, it belonged to my predecessor. I didn't learn until after I was selected to replace her that

she was murdered. It was an unsolved case, and I… I needed to know *why.* I thought, if I could get access to her computer, maybe there would be a clue somewhere."

"And if it wasn't for that post…"

"You would never have come to the Institute. You wouldn't be here now."

A full minute passes before Tessa speaks.

"Did it even help?"

"Not as much as I would have liked, no," Jon says with a short, humorless laugh.

Tessa's lips move wordlessly for a few seconds before she eventually snaps, "Why the *hell* did you feel like it was your job to solve a murder, anyway?"

"It seemed unlikely that it would ever be solved – the police certainly didn't seem invested in it – and I was worried that I would be next." Jon rubs the back of his neck for a few seconds before twirling a lock of hair around his finger, tugging gently. What does it say about his life that he misses when things were as simple as a workplace murder? "There's more to the story, but – suffice it to say, I was paranoid and stubborn and - and unstable, and people got hurt because of it."

The silence stretches between them for several minutes this time before Tessa speaks again.

"I don't forgive you." Jon winces before he can think better of it, and Tessa continues: "But your apology is accepted."

Jon gives her a baffled look. "I… I don't understand."

“I can appreciate a genuine apology, and you seem sincere enough.” Tessa shrugs. “Sounds like you acted out of disregard for others, rather than out of malicious intent. Still not great, but I don’t think one action defines a person.” Her expression hardens and her voice turns firm. “But that doesn’t mean I have to forgive the action. And I’m not ready to forgive, not when I’m still living through the consequences. Maybe not ever.”

“That’s fair,” Jon says, and he means it. “Especially since – well, I don’t know how to stop the dreams. If I find a way, I’ll do it, absolutely, but for now… I can’t promise an end to this.”

Tessa makes a noncommittal noise.

“I *am* hoping that I’ll maintain basic bodily autonomy going forward. That way, I can – I can try to intervene again, the next time you get trapped in the loop. I’ve done this a couple times now, with other dreams. So far, it seems that if the script gets interrupted, we can ride out the rest of the dream without the nightmare component.”

“And if you go back to how you were before?”

“Then I’m forced back into the role of Watcher, I suppose.” The thought of it fills him with dread, but he isn’t about to make Tessa process that with him, so he quickly moves on. “But – but I think maybe you don’t need *me* to break the script? It might be enough to just… memorize how you feel right now.”

“What do you mean?”

“This is the first time you’ve been here and still had control of your own actions. The moment you’re sat in front of that computer, you become a passenger in your own body.” Jon gives his hair another light tug as he hunts for the right phrasing. “Find something – a word, a gesture, a memory, anything – that you can associate with how you feel right here, right now. Something sensory, or at least simple enough that you can remember even when – when your thoughts start to disintegrate.”

“'The angles cut me when I try to think,'” Tessa recites quietly. It sends a shiver up Jon’s spine, and he Knows it does the same for her.

“It’s an accurate description, isn’t it?”

Tessa gives him a suspicious look. “You can feel it?”

“Yes.” Jon shifts uncomfortably at the memory of it. “Like having your consciousness torn apart until everything is sharp edges and… and noise.”

Jon can feel Tessa’s anger soften a bit, and he Knows that it’s not out of forgiveness. It’s because she feels vindicated, knowing that the one responsible for her suffering is at least facing the same torture as she is. She feels a twinge of shame over that feeling, he Knows, but even if she didn’t, he wouldn’t hold it against her. Honestly, he isn’t ready to receive forgiveness any more than Tessa is ready to give it.

“Anyway,” he says, unceremoniously shoving the Knowing away, “breaking the association between the computer and the loss of control might be enough to snap you out of the usual dream sequence.”

“Trick my brain with a bit of classical conditioning?” Tessa snorts. “*That’s* your advice?”

“Just a suggestion.” Jon shrugs. “I’ve found it helpful from time to time.”

“Alright then, Pavlov’s monster.”

Jon gives an awkward little laugh. “Never heard that one before, either.”

“I’m sure I can come up with more,” she says, and graces him with a very small, very tentative smirk. It feels remarkably like an olive branch – or maybe just the ghost of one. He doesn’t feel like he deserves even that.

Tessa refuses Jon's offer to stay with her until she wakes up, so he stands and takes his leave.

Jon isn't walking for long when the dreamscape shifts around him again. Rain patters down on the asphalt of a lonely road, stretching onward and outward with no end in sight. The harsh police lights refract off of the rain and the mist, the incessant bright flash sending a stabbing pain right to his temples.

He drifts towards the coffin on autopilot, never once breaking his stride, and he throws the chains aside. Before he can think twice about it, he walks down those familiar steps, taking two at a time in his haste to get through this segment of the dream as quickly as possible.

The instant the soil closes in around him, he reflexively calls Daisy's name. It takes him three desperate shouts before he remembers with a sinking feeling that he won't find her here. The coffin doesn't allow for sleeping or dreaming, and it will be another few months before Jon can go in after her.

As soon as he resigns himself to that realization, the earth falls away and he's standing in a coffin of a different sort, watching Karolina Górka from across a sweltering, buckling train car. All around them, the twisted metal groans and strains under unimaginable pressure. Karolina does not respond to his explanations, his apologies, his offers to help, his questions. She simply watches him, as he used to watch her, and smiles, until the train car collapses in on her and the scenery fades.

Next time, he tells himself, fighting back nausea and guilt. There has to be some way to reach her, and he has plenty of time to figure it out. *Next time.*

When Jon finds himself in front of Helen's door, standing solitary in open air, he's half-tempted to fling it open, to finally see where it leads in this place. He has to force himself to turn away –

Which, as expected, gives him a full view of the undulating carpet of ants. He scans the swarm diligently, watching it writhe and twist until he catches sight of a hand reaching out to him, and he lunges to grab hold of it. As soon as Jordan is free of the horde, he shrinks away in terror, and Jon can feel the way his emotions vacillate: gratitude, confusion, fear, suspicion.

“This way,” Jon says urgently, trying to keep his own mounting fear out of his tone and waving Jordan forward. Jordan looks hesitant until the incinerator door materializes beside them, heralding the appearance of Jane Prentiss. “Keep walking.” Jon's voice is definitely taking on a panicked edge now, despite his best efforts. “Don’t look at her.”

Much to Jon’s relief, Jordan listens and hastens after him. In this part of the dream, Jordan has always stood there frozen, eyes darting between the Archivist and the Hive, unable to decide which was the lesser of two evils. This time – for now, at least – Jordan seems willing to take his chances with Jon.

Jon, of course, can’t fully avert his gaze. Even as he walks away, a few mutinous eyes watch behind him, captivated by Jane and the simmering worms wriggling and tunneling through her flesh. Jane’s burning stare burrows into him like larvae. He fights the urge to scratch.

“Cover your ears.” Jon is careful to keep the compulsion out of his voice. Luckily, Jordan complies of his own volition – and not a moment too soon, as the hive begins to screech out its death knell only seconds after the words leave Jon’s mouth. Jon watches as Jane’s eyes liquefy and run down her cheeks. All the while, she screams and screams and screams until finally her throat crumbles to ash along with the rest of her.

Jon stops then, bending over with his hands on his knees, trying to quell his trembling. Jordan nearly runs right into him, throwing himself backward at the last moment and hitting the ground with a grunt. He takes one look at Jon and begins to scramble away. Now that Jane Prentiss is gone, all of his terror can be directed at the sole remaining monster.

“W-wait,” Jon says, voice raspy. “I – I don’t want to hurt you.”

Jordan stops moving, but he continues to stare with wide, terrified eyes.

“I know what I look like, and I’m – I’m sorry about that, I don’t have much control over them.” Jon gestures halfheartedly at the eyes phasing in and out in the air around him. Their focus darts about in all directions, greedy and possessive and eager to See everything there is to See. Even just a momentary glance at their restless movements elicits a burst of annoyance, and he can’t resist once again striking out at the nearest grouping of them. They instantly dissipate and Jon turns his human eyes back to Jordan. “But I want to help.”

“You’ve never helped before,” Jordan says hoarsely.

“I know. The dream wouldn’t let me.”

“But now suddenly it will?”

“Yes, and I’m hoping it stays that way. But – but if it doesn’t –”

Before he can finish, Jordan flickers out of sight as his real body wakes. Jon groans in frustration. He would have liked to outline a contingency plan in the same way that he did with Naomi and Tessa, but… hopefully the next time Jordan sleeps, Jon can continue the discussion.

The eyes that he had previously banished pop back into existence one by one to his left.

“I really, *really* hate you, you know that?”

In unison, they all blink and reopen, slow and purposeful. He tries not to assign personality to them, but he can't help thinking that they look *amused.*

Jon swears, turns away from them, and kicks at the ground uselessly. Hopefully Jonah isn’t watching this impotent little outburst, but just in case, Jon takes the time to glower up at the

Eye looking down on him before he stalks off. It definitely makes him look even more like a petulant child, but at the moment, he can't bring himself to care.

Jon paces feverishly in front of the door to the dissection lab, scratching absently at the back of his burned hand as he tries to calm his nerves. In one fluid motion, he reaches out to grab the door handle, then shrinks back again and runs his fingers through his hair with an agitated sigh. At this rate, she'll wake up before he works up the courage to go in there.

He reaches toward the handle again, but stops at the last moment and raps his knuckles lightly against the door instead. *Knock-knock,* his mind supplies, sending a chill through his veins.

Even though he's expecting it, he still starts at the answering, "Hello?"

Jon braces himself and opens the door, and suddenly he's eyes-to-eyes with –

"Georgie…"

The customary sadness and pity in her expression fade away, replaced by faint surprise.

"Jon?"

Chapter End Notes

- JON GETS TO USE HIS WORDS AGAIN! Finally. (There will still be some more Archive-speak peppered in throughout later chapters, though.)

- I took some liberties with Naomi's and Tessa's characterization, since we only got an episode each of them + some glimpses of their nightmares in MAG 121, and Naomi *was* in the middle of grieving during her episode. Hopefully they don't come off as too OOC,

but either way, I was having fun writing their dialogue like this, so I just kinda ran with it.

- The scene with Georgie was running long, so I decided to end it there and pick it up in the next chapter. (Chapter 5 should be ready by this weekend, hopefully.)

- Btw, it was very tempting to title this chapter “How Am I Gonna Be an Optimist About This?” because Bastille’s “Pompeii” has been stuck in my head for days now and honestly?? It's probably not a bad song choice for these first four chapters.

Second Chance

Chapter Summary

In which Jon reconnects with a friend, ponders second chances, plans his next moves... and endures a truly unfair amount of *waiting*.

Chapter Notes

GEORGIE TIIIIME!

CWs for Chapter 5: flashbacks re: canon-typical trauma (each of Jon's encounters with the Fears is mentioned, some more detailed than others - worms and Circus-related horror in particular); brief mentions of eye horror/gouging.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Hi, Georgie," Jon says meekly. There's a raw quality to his tone that he didn't anticipate. *Don't cry,* he warns himself. *Don't you dare cry.*

Georgie surveys him – not with fear, of course, but with a combination of caution and interest.

"My eyes are up here," Jon says with a small, hesitant smile.

"Jonathan Sims, was that a *joke?"*

"People might assume otherwise, but I *do* have a sense of humor."

"Not like that you don't."

“It’s Martin’s,” Jon admits. When he feels himself start to flush, he averts his human eyes. Useless, really, considering how most of the others are still concentrated on Georgie, but it’s just force of habit at this point.

Georgie grins for a brief moment. Jon is suddenly struck with the magnitude of how *long* it’s been since he’s seen her smile, and then it fades.

“You’ve picked up quite a few more…” Georgie motions vaguely at Jon and his general vicinity.

“Yes.” Jon shifts his weight from one foot to the other. “They aren’t, ah… manifesting in my hospital room, are they?”

Georgie looks at him like he’s grown an extra head. Though, that may have less to do with his question and more with yet another eye that just emerged unsolicited on his left cheekbone. *Great timing.*

“Uh… no?”

“Oh, good.” He doesn’t bother to understate his relief. Everyone already saw him as a monster last time; retaining his post-apocalyptic nightmare ‘he’s-all-eyes’ look would have made an already difficult challenge nearly impossible.

“So, you… know where you are, then?”

“Yes.”

When he doesn’t elaborate, Georgie’s eyes sweep up and down his figure again. Jon feels exposed. *Seen.* She folds her arms and jerks her chin in his direction.

“You’ve got mud all over you.”

“I… had to help someone climb out of a grave earlier.” In an attempt to distract himself from his own self-consciousness, he begins playing with a lock of hair at the nape of his neck.

“And the blood?”

“Dream pica,” Jon says guardedly. “And a dissection lab.” He looks around the pristine room they’re standing in. “A – a different one. With more… blood.”

“Right.”

The awkward silence drags on a bit too long.

“It’s… it’s good to see you, Georgie,” he ventures.

“Jon, is it really you?”

“Yes.” Georgie doesn’t respond, and her expression is unreadable. “I – I don’t have any way to make you believe me, but… listen, Georgie, I – there are some important things I have to tell you before you wake up.”

Before she can stop him, he plunges into the first bullet point on his agenda.

“First, Melanie. I don’t know how much she told you about her trip to India, but she still has a bullet in her leg, and it’s poisoning her. It didn’t show up on any scans then, and it probably still won’t, but it needs to come out. I know she’s been hurting, growing angrier–”

“How do you–”

“Please trust me, Georgie. I don’t know whether Melanie will listen to you, especially when you tell her the information came from me, but – but I think she already knows about the bullet, knows what it’s doing to her. She might not want to give it up, and – and it’s not my place to make that decision for her, but – the Slaughter wants to claim her, and I don’t think any good can come from becoming an Avatar.” He laughs bitterly. “Maybe – maybe that would be enough to convince her. Just tell her she could end up a monster like me.”

“Jon–”

“I just wanted to let you know,” he interrupts again. “You know her better than I do, and she can trust you more than she can trust anyone at the Institute. I don’t know what your relationship is like right now, if she would listen to you, and – and you don’t have to tell me. But you both deserve to know about it. And she… she deserves a chance to heal. She deserves to know that she has a choice.”

“Okay. That’s... a lot to unpack.” Then, businesslike: “What else?”

“Martin. He needs to know that I’m coming back. It – it might take another month or two, but I’m going to wake up.”

“Jon, I’ve never even spoken to him.”

“I know, and – and right now, he’s distancing himself from the others, too. But he’s in danger.” Georgie raises her eyebrows. “A *new* kind of danger. If you could ask Melanie to get a message to him, to just – tell him that I’m asking him to wait a few more months before giving up on me.”

“I’ll pass the message on to Melanie,” Georgie says evenly, “but I’m not going to pressure her about it.”

“I understand.”

“You… think you can wake up, then?”

“Yes. And I will.” He pauses. “Soon, I hope.”

“You going to explain, or keep being mysterious?”

“I… listen, Georgie, I want to tell you, I do–”

“But you can’t, because as usual, you think you know what you’re doing, and you’re going to rush ahead and throw yourself at–”

“No,” he says hurriedly. “I know it seems like I’m falling into a – a familiar pattern, but that’s not what this is. I want to tell you, and I *will* tell you, it just – it can’t be here.”

“And why not?”

“Because Elias is probably watching us right now.”

“Your *boss* Elias?" Georgie gives him a blank look. "Your boss Elias who is *in prison* right now for the murders he framed you for? *That* Elias?”

“Yes.”

“You think he can, what, snoop on your coma dreams?”

“And most places in the physical world aren’t safe from him, either.”

“Right,” Georgie sighs. She’s known Jon long enough to tell when he isn’t going to budge. “Where, then?”

“The tunnels under the Institute. It’s a universal blind spot; he can’t See there.”

“And you aren’t worried about him overhearing *that?”*

“No. He’s likely already aware that we know about the properties of the tunnels. Besides, this isn’t some secret battle we’re all fighting. Everything is out in the open. I don’t have to hide my suspicions, and he’s stopped pretending not to be evil. He can safely assume that I’m keeping secrets and plotting behind his back just the same as he is.” Jon glares up at the ceiling and the Watcher beyond it. “I just don’t want him to know the details.”

“Can’t he read minds?” Georgie looks away. “It’s just – Melanie mentioned–”

“It’s… complicated.” Jon folds his arms and starts pacing slowly, retracing the same six-foot space back and forth as he pieces together an explanation. “Elias can See things that happen almost anywhere, but he has to concentrate in order to do it. He can Know a person’s secrets and details about their past, but I don’t think it’s mind-reading, per se, it’s just… Knowing, and – and there are limits on it. And he can implant images and knowledge into a person’s mind, but I think he has to actually be within eyesight in order to do it.”

Jon abruptly stops pacing and stares transfixed at his feet.

“It sounds like there’s a ‘but.’”

“I don’t think he can actually read a person’s thoughts in real time. Sometimes it seems like it – he has a gift for reading people, and he always seems to know how best to manipulate or… or break a person. But I think that’s an entirely non-supernatural gift.” Jon hugs his sides and draws his shoulders in, suddenly feeling both too small and too noticeable. “It’s monstrosity, but of a very human sort,” he murmurs softly.

“You’re sure?”

“Fairly sure, yes, though it doesn’t hurt to take as many precautions as possible. I do plan on explaining things after I wake up, but only in the tunnels.” He gives Georgie a pleading look. “I wouldn’t ask you to come to the Institute if there was another option, but it… it has to be there. And I – I get it if you don’t want to see me in person, I can tell Melanie and then she can tell you, but it just – it still has to be in the tunnels.”

“Jon, it isn’t that I don’t want to see you. I’ve been visiting you in hospital–”

“I know.”

“You could hear me?”

“Not – not quite. I only just started being able to hear what goes on out there. But I… I know you’ve been visiting. Thank you.” Jon pauses, biting his lower lip. “Though I know that you… weren’t expecting me to recover.”

“It’s been four months, Jon. You have no heartbeat, you’re not *breathing*–”

“I know. And you’re thinking I’ve passed a point of no return and that you should cut ties with me before I drag you down with me.”

“Well, have you?”

“Passed a point of no return?” He looks up at the ceiling and closes his human eyes. “Yeah. A few of them, actually. I’m not fully human anymore, and I don’t think there’s a way to reverse it. But I – I’m still me, and I want to stay that way. You told me once – not long ago, I suppose – you said that if I was becoming something inhuman, I needed people in my life. To remind me of my humanity. You were right. There are more points of no return I could stumble into, I could get worse, and I don’t…” He swallows hard, fighting back the threat of tears. “I want to get better.”

“Do you, though?” Georgie’s voice is gentle, but firm. “Actually?”

“Yes,” Jon says without hesitation. “I really, really do. I can’t escape from the Institute, or from the Beholding. Not any time soon, anyway. Even when I was staying with you, I was physically dependent on reading statements – I just didn’t realize it yet. Running away and staying out of danger isn’t really an option for me anymore. It… hasn’t been for a long time. Maybe ever since I took the job.”

Georgie presses her lips into a thin line, and Jon can tell he’s losing her.

“But I’m not – I know you don’t believe me, but I’m not seeking out danger or heroics. I’m not… I’m not playing the martyr, or – or trying to court tragedy. I would love to go a month – hell, a *week* without the threat of death or worse hanging over me,” he says with a short, humorless laugh, “but that won’t happen as long as I’m the Archivist. So I – I don’t know what ‘better’ looks like for me now that I’m like this, but I want to try. I think this is a second chance, and I… I want to take it.”

“I want to believe you, Jon. It’s just…”

“You’ll believe it when you see it.” One corner of his mouth twitches up in a rueful smile.

“Yeah.” Georgie’s answering smile doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

He can’t really blame her for being skeptical. They had a conversation remarkably similar to this one before, shortly before their breakup – minus the supernatural elements, of course. He’d had a breakdown, finally admitted that he needed help, agreed to go to counseling – and then quit after two sessions. She’s seen his obsessiveness, his refusal to take care of himself, the self-destructive patterns he falls into, his apparent allergy to emotional vulnerability. He’s never shown her any other side of him. Come to think of it, he didn’t know he *had* another side until… all of this.

“Look,” Georgie says after a moment and a sigh, “I – I’m not going to cut you out, not completely. But I may need some distance, you understand?”

“Of course.”

“And I can’t be your only support.”

“I wouldn’t want that.”

“And I have to decide how much I’m willing to get involved in… all of this.” Georgie frowns. “It’s just complicated, what with…”

“Melanie.”

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t want you trapped there, either – I think all of you should quit, actually. If you ever figure out how. Maybe even burn the place down just to be safe.” If she’s joking about the latter, Jon can’t tell. He doesn’t *disagree* with her, per se, but he does take a moment to wonder, not for the first time, how he’s managed to surround himself with so many people who see arson as a first resort. “It’s just–”

“Listen, that’s actually the last thing I wanted to mention – I might have a way for Melanie to quit.”

“What?”

“I – I think the only reason she hasn’t been completely taken over by the Slaughter is because of her connection to the Eye, so it would be safest to remove the bullet first, if she decides that's what she wants, but – yes, there’s a way for her to quit.” He runs one hand through his hair and grimaces. “It’s drastic, but everyone needs to know they have the option. I can’t talk about the details here, though, and I – I’d rather everyone hear everything I have to say before making any decisions.”

“You get more and more cryptic every time I see you, you know that?”

“Trust me, this is an improvement on…” *Being the voice of the Archive,* he does not say. “It could be worse.”

“See? Cryptic.”

“That can’t be the most off-putting thing about me.” As if on cue, another eye opens on his throat, centered on the scar that Daisy left him, and he cringes. *More impeccable timing.*

“Nah,” Georgie says after a contemplative hum. “I think the weirdest thing is how you just had an entire conversation about your feelings and didn’t once try to change the subject. Who are you, and what did you do with Jonathan Sims?”

Jon laughs. “I guess I’ve… grown, a bit.”

“Yeah, but *when?* Since you’ve been in a coma? This place doesn’t exactly seem ripe with opportunities for personal growth.”

“I…”

“Let me guess: you can’t talk about it.”

“Not here.” Jon gives her an apologetic smile.

“Right.”

Jon looks down again, scuffing one foot against the floor to fill the quiet.

“So when can we expect you back in the world of the living?”

“No more than a few months, I think. Hopefully sooner. It depends on how long it takes me to figure it out.”

“Are you sure you’ll be able to?”

“If I can’t do it on my own, someone else will do it for me. This in-between state doesn’t suit the Beholding, and there are at least a few interested parties who will force me to make a choice if I take too long. The Archivist has a role to perform, and right now, I’ve removed myself from the game board. Either I submit to the hand that moves me, or I die and make room for the next unsuspecting pawn in line.” Jon looks up. “Sorry, that came out more dramatic than I intended.”

“A bit,” Georgie says, not unkindly.

“What I mean is, the coma has a time limit no matter what I do or don’t do. I’m not human enough to die, but I’m too human to live, so I have two choices: I accept what I’ve become and I wake up. I’ll still be me, but I’ll be even less human than I was before, and I’ll have to… make the best of that. *Or*, I sever my connection with the power that’s keeping me alive, and I die – not quite human, but not a monster, either. A slow death, though,” he adds bitterly. “To make sure I have plenty of time to change my mind.”

“Sounds to me like you *haven’t* made up your mind.”

“I have, actually. It’s just… I don’t know how to finalize my choice, I suppose?”

“You can’t just ask to speak to a manager?” One look at Georgie’s playful grin, and Jon feels himself smiling in return.

“I wish. No, I – it’s… hm. Like I need to find my way to a crossroads, but I don’t have directions or a map.”

“Maybe you just need a chaperone.” When Jon gives her a serious look, her teasing smirk fades. “What, seriously?”

“Yeah. I haven’t given up on finding my own way, but if I take too long, I expect a guide will pass this way and… *encourage* me to choose a path and follow it to the end.”

“I’d ask you how you know all this, but I doubt you'll tell me.”

“I Know it because of the Eye, broadly speaking, but there’s a more specific answer I want to give you. Just… not here.”

“Fine," Georgie says, but she doesn't sound upset, much to Jon's relief. "Anything else?”

Jon almost says no, but…

“Maybe… maybe one more thing,” he says, lowering his gaze, suddenly showing keen interest in the floor. “I’ve never had any control in these dreams, and I’m terrified that I’ll lose it again. If I do, just… behind all the eyes, it’s still me. I can see you, and hear you, and I was wondering if… I know it’s stupid, but if it’s alright with you – and I completely understand if it’s not, I don’t want you to feel obligated–”

“What, Jon?”

“Could you still talk to me, maybe?” Jon says it so quickly that it comes out all as one word. “I won’t be able to answer, but it would still be nice to hear your voice. Tell me about the Admiral, or your current knitting project – or the newest *What the Ghost*, and the weirdest listener feedback it got, or… or the latest dick move your landlord pulled. Anything.”

When Georgie doesn't reply right away, Jon keeps his head down and braces himself for disappointment. He didn't mean to sound so desperate; now he's made things weird. He probably shouldn't have –

"Huh," Georgie says finally. "Are you *sure* you haven't been able to hear me talking to you out there?"

"Not… not that I know of?" Jon cautiously looks up at her. "Not consciously, at least."

"Hmm. Well, next time I see you, if you're as unresponsive in here as you are out there, I'll just do what I usually do when I visit you in hospital, which is natter on about my personal life and tell you all about the Admiral's latest adventures in protecting the flat from spiders."

"Brave boy," Jon says fondly, and Georgie snorts.

They spend some time talking about the Admiral and his newfound obsession with bread ties until, mid-sentence, Georgie wakes. Jon is left alone in a sterile dissection lab, the harsh fluorescent light underscoring the emptiness of the place.

The conversation went… better than he had dared to hope, really. He's both stunned and relieved that Georgie hasn't written him off yet, but also terrified of messing things up again, of squandering his second chance. He can't count on getting a third. This is his one opportunity to fix things, to do better, to *be* better, and he needs to make it count.

No pressure, he thinks to himself grimly, and he heads for the door as the scenery around him begins to fade out.

Time is difficult here.

It was difficult at the end of the world, too. Towards the end, Jon didn't even bother to keep track of it, but he *could* have Known, if he had wanted. Here, though, he can't seem to Know anything about what's happening outside of the dream.

He relies on his conversations with his fellow dreamers to gauge the time and date in the outside world, and it doesn't take long for him to realize that his perception of time is wildly inconsistent. Sometimes what feels like hours to him translates to a week on the outside; sometimes a single night in the real world is stretched into days for Jon. There are indeterminate lapses of time during which he drifts in that directionless void again – times when, he assumes, all of the other dreamers are awake, leaving no nightmare settings for him to occupy.

At least the passage of time seems to be progressive. Time travel is difficult enough without hopping around to different points on the timeline. He's glad to see that, his initial leap backwards notwithstanding, time still seems to be moving in one direction.

It's taken a long time for Jon to stop waiting for the moment when he will lose his agency and become the Watcher's marionette again. A small part of him is still waiting for the rug to be ripped out from under him, but for the most part, he's allowed himself to relax into it and silence his customary pessimism. He still isn't sure exactly *why* he has so much control now. It's a… well, not *best*-case scenario – that would be freedom from the dreams altogether, for himself and for the others – but it's still an unexpected boon that he never would have even thought to consider.

The best theory he can come up with is that he's simply stronger now, after completing his metamorphosis into the Archive. If so, it's somewhat worrisome. It would mean that coming back in time rewound most of the timeline, but he remains a product of its original trajectory. He is an artifact of a cascade of disasters that never happened – that *will* never happen, if he manages to foil Jonah's plans. There's no way of telling how the world might react to his presence in it. Is he an allergen of sorts, a paradox that cannot be reconciled? Is he something akin to the rift itself? He hopes not – it will be difficult to convince anyone of his humanity if he radiates the same sort of wrongness as the crack in the foundation at Hill Top Road.

Most of all, he wonders what it means for the Archivist's progress.

At this point in his original timeline, he had been marked by the Web, the Eye, the Corruption, the Spiral, the Desolation, the Vast, the Hunt, and the Stranger. If he isn't already marked by the End, he will be by the time he wakes up. That leaves the Slaughter, the Buried, the Dark, the Flesh, and the Lonely. He still has to rescue Daisy, so a second encounter with the Buried is a given. Avoiding the Slaughter and the Lonely may be difficult, considering they've both already taken up residence in the Archives. He can try to avoid Jared Hopworth and Ny-Ålesund, but that doesn't mean that he wouldn't stumble across the Flesh and the Dark some other way. Jonah Magnus is nothing if not resourceful – he won't give up just because Jon happens to evade two of his traps.

Not to mention, Jon has an unfortunate tendency to serve himself up to the Fears on a silver platter. He's gotten better at tempering his recklessness, at trusting others, at not going it alone, but still – in the past, he's had an almost supernatural ability to make Jonah's job *easy*. It's possible – *probable* – that the Web was – *is* – pulling strings, but trying to account for the Web is like searching a beach for a single grain of sand.

Then there's Jonah Magnus' suggestion that Jon's life amounts to a truly unfortunate streak of bad luck, but luck is a nebulous concept, and a lot of Jon's so-called chronic "bad luck" could be a direct result of the manipulations of – speak of the devil – the Web and Jonah Magnus. At this point, Jon suspects his misfortune probably has more to do with his being easily manipulated than it does with any sort of intrinsic unluckiness or tragic destiny.

Jon's initial encounter with the Web may or may not have been chance, but becoming the Archivist had nothing to do with luck. Jonah chose him because he knew that Jon would be easy to isolate, terrorize, and control. It was a deliberate action, not some passive twist of fate. Everything that unfolded from that point onward was carefully orchestrated and monitored by Jonah, and he always had contingency plans to keep Jon on the intended path. Yes, Jon made it easy for him in many ways, and he's still responsible for his choices – but on a good day, he can force himself to acknowledge that regardless of what choices he made, Jonah likely would have been ready with an equally effective backup plan to counter any move Jon did or did not make.

Which is exactly why now, even with the advantage of foreknowledge, Jon is still absolutely terrified of Jonah Magnus.

But the more Jon thinks about it – and the more his attempts to Know yield nothing – the more he worries that all of that is moot. He recalls Jonah Magnus' statement with a shudder.

...if I could find an Archivist and have each Power mark them, have them confront each one and in turn instill in them a powerful and acute fear for their life, they could be turned into a conduit for the coming of this nightmare kingdom. Do you see where I'm going with this, Jon?

It wasn't enough to have the Entities cause him bodily harm. The scars are just physical reminders of the encounter. Some of the Fears didn't even leave him with visible scars. No, the *real* mark always depended on Jon's lived experience of the confrontation: the terror, the pain, the confusion, the desperation, the alienation from himself, and the lingering, compounding trauma.

Knocking on Mr. Spider's door, looking on as the monster took its substitute victim and saddled him with lifelong survivor's guilt. The worms gnawing and tunneling through his skin, wriggling against bone, lavishing praise on the give of his flesh, crooning that he will be cherished, he will be perfect, he will be a home. The pandemonium of the Distortion's corridors; the razor edge of the bones in its hands. The white-hot agony of melting flesh; the terror of terminal velocity without an end; the inexorable press of a knife against his throat.

An entire month of nothing but raw sensory input, disjointed and unfathomable: chittering, faceless things; ropes chafing and eroding furrows into skin; the ache of a jaw forced open by a length of cloth; cramping muscles and screaming joints; chill air and tailor's tape on bare skin; layer after slimy layer of lotion; the scent of lavender cut through with the metallic tang of blood; so many *hands, hands, hands,* ever-present and unyielding. Nikola would mark dotted lines onto his skin with a felt-tip marker, providing a cheerful running commentary as she worked – the sorry state of his skin and her promise to get it into proper shape; vivid descriptions of how it would feel to be flensed alive, exquisitely painful yet so very liberating; how grateful he should be that he would get to be part of something so much greater than himself – all of it overlaid with Jon's unquestioning conviction that no one was coming to help him.

And encore after encore: an explosion, an endless nightmare, an impossible choice; the aching strain of bones bending, the agonizing snap of bones breaking, the unsettling vacancy left behind; the damp, earthy press of the coffin; the terrible beauty of unknowable darkness burning holes in his Sight.

Martin paling, fading, vanishing –

“Are you scared, Jon?”

“Yes.”

“Perfect.”

– almost disappeared, almost lost, almost alone.

Jon remembers it all in perfect, visceral detail, every sensation and panic-stricken thought seared into him and easily accessible at the merest twitch of an overactive imagination. He witnessed and experienced worse during the apocalypse, but still those tired old flashbacks would overtake him and bring him to his knees without warning as he passed between domains.

The question of mind-body dualism is well-settled at this point, at least as far as Avatars are concerned. Jonah Magnus has been body-hopping for centuries, discarding vessels and possessing new ones on a whim; Jon himself is currently a living mind tethered to a body that is in most other respects clinically dead. What if the body is irrelevant, and what really matters is the conscious mind?

In that case, it does not matter whether this body encounters those final five marks. As long as Jon remembers receiving them, his consciousness is still scarred by all Fourteen of the Dread Powers. What’s more, traversing the ruined earth retraced those marks several times over, branding him more deeply with every passage through an Entity’s domain.

It means that Jon is still a living chronicle of terror, fully prepared and ready and marked – and he’s delivered himself to Jonah Magnus months ahead of schedule.

Once again, Jon has played right into Jonah's hands. He can only hope that Jonah doesn’t Know it. Even if he doesn’t, it seems foolish to hope that he won’t find out eventually.

“You’re never going to let me live this down, are you?”

“Absolutely not,” Naomi wheezes, doubled over with laughter.

Jon groans and covers his face with his forearms, still lying on his back in the mud. He'd been helping Naomi out of her grave, as had become the routine, but she lost her footing just as she reached the top. In his scramble to catch her, he lost his balance and toppled in after her. Now they’re both stuck down here.

“Break any bones, old man?”

“It’s a dream, Naomi.” Jon sits up and halfheartedly wipes the dirt off his hands, to little effect. “Also, I’m only thirty.”

Well, sort of. Physically, at least.

“Could’ve fooled me.”

He glares at her, but it’s tempered by an amused twist of the lips that he can’t quite suppress – which just makes Naomi snicker again.

“So,” she says after a moment, “still haven’t woken up?”

“Still trapped,” Jon says, all the levity bleeding out of him in an instant.

“No luck with the anchor?”

“No luck.” Jon leans back against the wall and crosses his arms. “Not for lack of trying – or practice. Just the thought of him has saved me more than once. But I guess it’s… different, when it involves trying to manipulate the hour of your own death.”

He should have suspected as much, really. Escaping a pocket dimension *is* different from trying to meddle with the End’s sphere of influence. In all the statements he’s consumed regarding Terminus, no one has ever been able to truly hold sway over it in any direction. It does not *want* anything, because everyone and everything succumbs to it eventually, given enough time. It doesn’t answer to summons or worship or pleas. Sometimes it elects to play games, but it engages only on its own terms, and no one ever wins – they simply accrue enough debt to delay the inevitable for as long as it takes to repay their dues.

“You’re being spooky again,” Naomi says brightly.

“At this point, I think it’s my default setting,” Jon deadpans back. “More importantly – did you end up going to meet the distinguished Duchess Jellybean Toes?”

“Yes!” Naomi leans forward with her hands on her knees, practically buzzing with excitement. “She’s *gorgeous*. A bit rude, though – she climbed up under my shirt, stuck her head out though my collar, and refused to budge for the entire visit.”

“Are you going to adopt her?”

“Mhm. I still need to buy some things and get the flat ready for her, but I already paid the adoption fee. Her name is a bit of a mouthful, though. Might have to change it.”

“Don’t you dare,” Jon says, giving her a severe look. He meant it as a joke, but when his voice dips lower than intended and too many eyes join in on the staring, he winces.

Naomi doesn’t react, though; she’s well past the point of finding him intimidating. “Hm. I’ll have to shorten it, at least.”

“Could just call her the Duchess,” Jon says, regulating his tone more carefully this time.

“It doesn’t sound too… I don’t know, pretentious?”

“Not at all. It sounds *regal,*” Jon insists. “I’ve told you about the Admiral, and he carries *his* title admirably.”

“If that was a joke, it was terrible.”

“That one was unintentional, actually.”

“Good. I almost had to reevaluate my opinion of you.”

“Can’t have that,” Jon says drily, and then his expression softens. “Seriously, I’m glad the adoption worked out for you.”

“Yeah. I think it’ll be good for me. Less lonely, you know,” she says, voice growing so faint that Jon can only barely hear her. Then, in a louder, more conversational tone: “Besides, I’ve always wanted a cat.”

“Me too,” Jon admits. “By the time I finally got a flat that allowed pets, I was… always at work. It didn’t feel right, adopting a cat and then leaving it alone all the time.”

“Well, you’re not dead yet. Not too late to develop a better work-life balance, even if you are…” Naomi wiggles her fingers. “You know, *spooky.”*

“Maybe,” Jon says, pointedly ignoring the jape.

“Oh.” Naomi sits up straighter and looks at him. “I just realized – are you going to be able to get out of here once I wake up?”

“That… is a very good question.” Jon smirks at her alarm. “I’m joking. It’ll fade out when you do. Then it’s either back to the void, or on to the next nightmare.”

“Spooky.”

“That’s your third strike. Quota met for the day.”

“You *really* are a buzzkill.”

“So I’m told,” Jon says. “Now, if you’re finished harassing me, tell me more about the Duchess.”

“Well, she’s a calico – *unbelievably* fluffy – and she’s only a year old…”

Jon has never been the most social person. He doesn’t go out of his way to make friends, conversations typically feel like minefields, and he has a propensity for going off on informational digressions that most people find annoying. He asks too many questions, frequently misses social cues, and has always had difficulty modulating his tone of voice. Becoming the Archivist only made things more complicated, since now a conversational misstep can easily mean unintentional compulsion or Knowing (and sharing) something that he shouldn’t.

Over time, he’s nonetheless become more dependent on human interaction and less tolerant of being alone. He knew he had been starved for companionship since he lost Martin, but he didn’t realize the extent of it until he started talking again, and in his own voice. So, when the voyeuristic nightmare sessions turn into social calls, he finds himself thriving on it in a way that he never expected.

There's his budding friendship with Naomi – unexpected, but far from unwelcome.

He still finds Dr. Elliott a bit insufferable, but Jon finds *himself* insufferable as well, so he can't judge too harshly. He always peeks into the anatomy lab to check that Elliott isn't in the throes of the nightmare. Sometimes they find some shared academic interest to discuss; other times, Elliott dismisses him, citing a disinterest in conversation at that moment. Jon never asks him to elaborate.

Tessa usually declines his company, but occasionally she'll wave him over and immediately launch into a discussion about neural networks or machine learning or some other tech-related subject that's been on her waking mind. It's usually more of a one-sided lecture than anything else, but Jon always finds himself riveted, listening hungrily as Tessa shines light on an unfamiliar subject.

The first few times he asked follow-up questions, she took it as feigned interest or ridicule, but once she realized that he was actually interested and not just humoring her out of guilt, she began to brighten every time he offered a new tangent for her to explore. He wouldn't call them *friends* by any stretch of the imagination, but she seems to enjoy talking to someone who doesn't tune her out when she begins to ramble. If nothing else, it's better than devouring a computer.

Jon doesn't have much in common with Jordan, to be honest. It doesn't take long for them to exhaust all avenues of conversation and lapse into an awkward silence. Jordan is skittish; he finds Jon's less-than-human appearance perpetually unsettling, but apparently prefers it to being left alone in this place. Eventually they settle on an unspoken arrangement of just staying within eyeshot of one another for the duration of the dream, even when the conversation runs dry.

In the silence, it's more difficult to stave off the Knowing, though, which means Jon gets treated to ceaseless updates on Jordan's mental state – and Jordan is more repulsed by all those eyes than he is by even the worst infestations he's encountered on the job. By the time Jordan wakes up, Jon usually feels like an insect half-dead and twitching in the aftermath of an insecticide assault. He can't blame Jordan, but it does take its toll on Jon's already abysmal self-esteem.

Karolina remains largely unresponsive. Jon sits with her, talks to her – *at* her, really – and hopes that he isn't just annoying her. Her eyes follow his movements, and sometimes she smiles, but otherwise, she's uncommunicative – whether by force or by choice, Jon doesn't know, and the Beholding doesn't seem inclined to tell him. Although he has yet to completely interrupt the dream sequence, there have been a few instances where the train car didn't collapse. He can't say conclusively whether that indicates *progress,* but at least it's evidence that the script can change.

On the one hand, it's probably a good sign that Jon doesn't have as much control over the Knowing as he did in the future. On the other hand, it's like having his wings clipped after learning to fly, and he *hates* it. The Beholding did withhold some things from him during the apocalypse, and there were subjects on which it could provide no insight, but for the most part, Jon had unfettered access to an ocean of knowledge. It's maddening to have it restricted once again.

Even before becoming the Archivist, he always hated unanswered questions; it may as well have been a core facet of his personality. But after so much time with the Archive at the forefront, to not Know is wholly incompatible with his nature in a deeper, existential sense. For the human part of him, it's like having an itch that can't be scratched; for the Archivist, it's excruciating; for the Archive, it's utterly incomprehensible.

The balance he'd found in the future is shifting. He isn't sure what that means for him just yet, or how he feels about it.

"How is Melanie?"

"Struggling," Georgie says, "but hopeful, I think. It's really not my place to say much more than that."

"Yes, of – of course. I'm… glad to hear that she's recovering."

"She's still angry that you won't tell me how she can quit."

“I will, I promise, I just… I need to explain everything first.”

“She said to tell you that it’s patronizing to assume she can’t make her own decision without you holding her hand.”

“I’m not – I just want it to be an *informed* decision.” Jon frowns. “That sounded condescending, didn’t it?”

“A bit, yeah.”

Jon looks down and rubs his temples. There’s a likelihood that if he tells Georgie right now, Melanie will blind herself before he even wakes up. It’s her choice, of course, but a choice never really feels like a *choice* when it’s presented as the only option, when vital information is being withheld that might affect one's decision.

Namely, the fact that his death would free all of them without a need for eye-gouging. He’s going to tell them – it doesn’t feel right to keep it to himself – but *that’s* something that he would rather Jonah not overhear. Jonah might be willing to lose Melanie if she takes an awl to her eyes, but if he thinks there’s a chance that she or any of the others would kill his Archivist just when he’s starting to show some promise, well… there’s no telling whether or how Jonah would choose to intervene.

“It’s not *just* that.” Jon glances up at the ceiling and the Eye just beyond it.

“Tunnels-only information?”

“Yeah,” Jon says, contrite. “She might not want to hear it, but please tell Melanie that I’m sorry. I’m hoping – what’s the date right now?”

“First of February.”

“She shouldn’t have to wait too much longer.”

“How do you know?”

“I just… do.” Jon winces at his weak delivery. He hates being so cagey, but he really has no other option.

“Right.”

“How is… how is Martin?” Jon asks tentatively, perking up ever so slightly. Georgie’s expression turns sympathetic.

“Melanie says they haven’t seen him,” she says gently.

“Oh.” Jon deflates, his cautious hope abruptly snuffed out.

“I’m sorry, Jon. Melanie did send a few emails, and when that didn’t get a response, she slipped a note under his door. But it’s been radio silence.”

“Oh,” he says again, almost a whisper this time. He covers his face with both hands and takes a minute to collect himself. “Um, c-can you tell Melanie I said thank you for trying? I–”

Georgie is gone before Jon can finish his sentence. The Admiral must have woken her for breakfast. He always has been a natural alarm clock.

The dissection lab dissolves around him, plunging him back into senseless, empty space. Left alone with his own thoughts once again, Jon immerses himself in worrying about Martin and a rotating litany of *what-ifs*.

Chapter End Notes

- Sorry this chapter isn't very plot-heavy!! It was getting really long and I had to split it into two chapters. Things will move along at the beginning of Chapter 6. It should be ready before the weekend. (Probably by tomorrow or Wednesday. I'm almost done with it.)

- There are two excerpts from the show in this one. The clip of Jonah's statement is from MAG 160; the brief "Are you scared?" interaction is from MAG 158.

- Fun fact: I definitely listened to Bleachers' "I Wanna Get Better" quite a few times while writing this chapter.

Rude Awakening

Chapter Summary

In which Jon wakes up, and things get (more) complicated.

Chapter Notes

CWs for Chapter 6: some ableism &internalized ableism (re: ADHD & anxiety); panic attacks; one (1) Big Swear, because Jon is BORED and he CAN'T HANDLE IT and it is A MOOD.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jon is back in that blank vacuum, and time is doing that thing where every moment feels like an eternity. He suspects it might have just as much to do with his innate intolerance of boredom as it does with sensory deprivation. The lack of any sort of stimulation in this place is unbearable. He never has been able to sit still for long periods of time, and he can't even *fidget* here, for fuck's sake.

It's like he's a child again...

...seven years old and lying face-down on the kitchen floor, swinging his legs in the air and complaining loudly about how there's nothing to do. *Normally, his grandmother might snap at him to go outside and stop pestering her, but a vicious thunderstorm is passing through and she won't let him play in it – and besides, he's* technically *grounded.*

Just two days ago, he had wandered off after being forbidden from leaving the yard. Again.

In his defense, there was a cat sunning itself just beyond the fence, and he wanted to say hello because he loves cats but his grandmother won't let him have one, and then the cat stood up and yawned and trotted off, and obviously he had to follow it, and then – before he knew it, two officers were escorting him home. Again.

His grandmother had been shocked to find the police on her doorstep with her intractable grandson in tow – she hadn't noticed he was missing – yet again.

After they left, she had been furious with him for embarrassing her like that. Again and again and again.

So, now he's under house arrest – a new term that he had picked up from the officers: "Your grandmother is going to put you under house arrest if you keep wandering off like this, kid." The first couple times, they had found his meanderings and adventurous nature cute, albeit worrisome; by the third time, the charm had worn off and the weary indulgence vanished along with it; the fourth time, he received a stern dressing down about safety and recklessness and making things difficult for his poor grandmother; and now, the fifth time, there had been a not-so-subtle warning about contacting social services to investigate neglect....

With each scolding, Jon would feel appropriately abashed in the moment, but it never took long for it to fade into the background, drowned out by a mind understimulated and screaming for some novel distraction. Somehow, courting negative attention was preferable to receiving no attention at all. When adults were being charitable, they called him precocious and clever. When he was testing their patience, though, he was a difficult child, a nuisance, a bother – and he had a tendency to exhaust even the most tolerant adult's patience very, *very* quickly. He's always been... difficult.

God, why is he even thinking about this? Is he really so starved for something to occupy his attention that he's digging into the annals of his childhood?

(Yes. Yes he is.)

He throws his head back with an aggravated sigh. Or he would, if he had a body here, but whenever there's no dreamer around to witness him, he's an incorporeal mind floating in (agonizing, *boring*) nothingness.

What he wouldn't give to be able to just jiggle his leg right now. Tap his fingers. Play with his hair – or better yet, Martin's; his hair was always so soft and he would always lean into

Jon's touch like a cat. It will probably be awhile before Jon gets to touch him again. If ever. What if –

Stop, he tells himself. *You're only going to catastrophize, and then you'll get depressed, and then you'll be useless. Why* are *you always so difficult? You–*

He throws the brakes so quickly he can almost *feel* the screeching halt. Crashing a train of thought like that is like ignoring an itch. *Itch, itch, itch,* the word echoes in his head – and now he wants to scratch at his worm scars.

Stop thinking about them – it'll just make you itchy, and you don't even have a body, which means you won't be able to scratch, and – and, yes, now you're itchy, and – damn it, can't you just sit still *and clear your mind for five sec–*

"Um. Hello, Jon. Do you… *mind* if I call you Jon?"

Wait. Is that…

"I mean, you don't *actually* know me. It's just, well. 'Archivist.' It's so formal, isn't it?"

Finally, Jon thinks with relief.

"Dreams are like that, you know. No matter how lucid you think they are, there's always that part that just drags you along. Guess I don't need to tell *you* that. At least, not right now."

Oliver. Oliver, can you hear me?

Oliver sighs. "Wish I could tell you *why* I came here."

Apparently not.

"Wish I *knew* why I came here."

When in doubt, blame the Web.

"Sorry to go on, I – I don't talk to many people these days. Putting my thoughts outside myself, it gets a bit, er, clumsy."

Jon knows the feeling.

"Be easier if you could talk back, right? Ask me questions, have it tumble all out?"

Easier, sure. But far more unpleasant.

"But no. It's – it's just me. Wish there was a better way, but touching someone's mind, it's not as simple as that? Doesn't always make things clearer, you know?"

Again, Jon *does* know.

"Still, I gave the old woman a statement, so maybe I owe you one as well. That's how it works, right? Give your terror, give your dream?"

Unfortunately.

"It's not like I don't have them to spare."

Preaching to a choir, Oliver.

"Let me tell you about how *I* tried to escape."

No – let's – can we just move things along?

"So. My name is Oliver Banks. In my other statements, I used the name Antonio Blake, but…"

Suppose not.

This probably counts as a live statement, and Jon had been keen to avoid those this time around. He wishes he could cover his ears, shut his eyes, block it all out – but then again, even if he could, *would* he? That familiar single-minded fixation is settling over him like a heavy fog, and it's as unnerving as ever – a craving that he doesn't want to indulge, but once he has a taste, it feels *right*. The guilt never comes until after the need is satiated.

It's nearly impossible to stop a statement once it starts. His mind starts to go fuzzy, restless, full of static and pressure. He's always wondered: is this what compulsion feels like to the people he turns it upon?

The static fades then, everything becoming sharp and clear and *real,* like a picture coming into focus. The Archivist is hungry, intent on every single word like a cat, motionless and unblinking, watching a moth beat itself senseless against a light.

And the Archive – the Archive is *ravenous.* Its presence looms in the background in a way that it hasn't since before Jon passed through the rift, weighing heavily on the back of his mind.

He gives up on trying to reach out and touch Oliver's mind for the time being, gives in to the need, and listens as the story twines itself around and through his thoughts. It's one that the Archivist has heard before, but he laps it up greedily all the same.

When Oliver finishes his account several minutes later, Jon feels brighter, more alert, reinvigorated. The disgust and shame will creep up on him later, he's sure, but for now, it feels *right*. He feels *whole.*

"Right," Oliver says. "That's, uh, it, I suppose. Maybe you heard me. Maybe you'll dream."

Oliver, Jon tries again. This time, for the briefest of moments, he thinks he can hear a subdued hum of static. *Can you hear me?*

"Then again, maybe I just wasted my breath – but I don't think so. Honestly, I'm still not exactly sure why I'm here. But you know better than anyone how the spiders can get into your head."

You don't need to rub it in, Jon mutters to himself.

"Easier to just do what she asks."

I beg to differ. The static picks up again, more of a persistent buzz this time. *Oliver, listen–*

"The thing is, Jon, right now you have a choice. You've put it off a long time, but it's trapping you here. You're not quite human enough to die, but still too human to survive."

Yes, yes, I know. The buzz becomes a shrill whine. *Oliver!*

"You're balanced on an edge where the End can't touch you, but you can't escape him. I made a choice. We all made choices. Now you have to–"

Oliver Banks.

“Um?”

Finally, Jon thinks, exasperated.

“Jon?” Oliver ventures. “Or, uh – Archivist?”

I prefer Jon.

“Huh.” Jon can pick up a soft squeaking noise, as if Oliver just leaned back in his chair. “I’ll be honest, I’m not sure how you’re even doing this.”

Neither do I, actually? Jon realizes with a start. *But– but I don’t exactly have time to worry about that right now–*

“I suppose it’s not unheard of,” Oliver muses, almost to himself. “I’m given to understand that Bouchard has the ability to broadcast knowledge into another person’s mind. I didn’t realize it was something the Archivist could do as well. I thought your job was more… pulling answers out of people. Acquiring knowledge, not giving it.”

I’d… really rather not dwell on it, Jon says, tamping down the momentary burst of fear that surges through him at the thought of comparing himself to Jonah. His mind has gotten trapped in that particular rut many times before, and it's never a good place to be.

Either Oliver respects Jon's wishes or simply doesn't care to waste energy pressing him on the matter, because he drops it and moves on to the main reason for his visit.

“Have you made your choice, Jon?”

I made my choice months ago. I just couldn't figure out how to act on it. How to actually wake up.

"I confess, I'm surprised to hear you declare your choice with such confidence." Jon hears fabric rustling – Oliver crossing his legs, maybe? "I was led to believe that you were… almost pathologically indecisive."

I… usually am, Jon admits, though Oliver's phrasing is a bit too incisive for his comfort. *But I made my choice, and I'd like to follow through on it now.*

"Ah. Well." Oliver sounds… perturbed. It almost reminds Jon of himself when he's unable to Know something. "Not sure why you couldn't before?"

Jon wonders if it has something to do with being newly well-fed. Or maybe he just needed direct contact from the End, a psychopomp of sorts to facilitate his transition in either direction? He still doesn't know exactly when he received the End's mark the first time around – whether it branded him the instant he technically died in the Unknowing, or if it needed time to fully settle. It's possible that encountering an Avatar of the End was necessary to finalize the mark – in which case, maybe Jonah or the Web didn't want him waking until that happened? But would they really have enough sway over Terminus to delay its work? Influencing one of its Avatars to *awaken* Jon is one thing; postponing or halting it would be something else entirely.

Speaking of, he can feel Oliver's eyes riveted on him, quietly observing and calculating as if trying to get an accurate estimate of the Archivist.

"But – but you can now. I think. The roots are…" Oliver falters, and Jon thinks he can feel him lean in closer. "There's something… *off* about you. The roots, they look… sick. Wrong. And the threads are – tangled." Another pause. "Can you explain it?"

Not here. I don't want Elias listening in.

"Doesn't he have eyes everywhere?"

Almost everywhere. The tunnels under the Institute are… a blind spot, sort of.

"And you would discuss it there?"

Within reason, Jon says warily.

He doubts whether Oliver would ever be an ally – judging from the statement he gave during the apocalypse, he's too fatalistic to intervene one way or the other – but he doesn't feel like an enemy, either. Maybe he would be interested in sharing information, or even just letting Jon bounce strategies and theories off of him? It might be helpful, having a mostly-neutral Avatar to consult.

Also, there's just something… lonely about Oliver.

If nothing else, it would be a break from the monotony for you, Jon adds.

"I don't know how I feel about visiting the Institute again. Not out of concern for my safety, mind. Just don't like the feeling of being watched. Feels… I don't know. Slimy."

That's one word for it.

"Apologies. I'm not a wordsmith, if you haven't noticed." Jon can hear Oliver shifting uneasily in his seat now.

I don't know, I'm sure you could put together a decent sermon on… existentialist philosophy, or macroeconomics, or the inevitability of death and taxes, or – or something.

"I'm not exactly pleasant company." Oliver's tone is matter-of-fact, but Jon thinks he can detect a trace of melancholy underneath the customary stoicism. "People tend to be…

unsettled when they meet a walking, talking *memento mori*."

No more unsettling than talking to an incarnation of paranoia, invasive surveillance, and terrible knowledge, Jon says sardonically. *Maybe some of the more vexing aspects of academia as well.*

Oliver chuckles at that, but cuts it short. It's almost like he didn't expect it. Jon thinks maybe he can understand. Go long enough without laughing, and then when you finally do, it will come out sounding all wrong to your ears. *Like an out-of-tune piano,* Martin said once. *You have a nice laugh, Jon. You just aren't used to hearing it, and right now it's a bit rusty from disuse.*

"I don't know that I was *ever* good company," says Oliver after a moment.

Can't be any worse than I am. Maybe you're just out of practice.

"Perhaps," Oliver says evasively.

Well, consider it an open invitation. Just… I don't know. Keep it in mind.

"Not like I can forget anything."

Quite a curse, isn't it?

"I've made my peace with it."

I know, Jon replies. He can't help but envy Oliver to an extent – how secure he is in his role, his tranquil embrace of his destiny.

Jon isn't being fair, though, is he? Oliver went through hell to achieve his current level of humble acceptance, and regardless of either of their current perspectives on fate and free will, the fact remains that they were both forced into making impossible choices under duress. They've both become something they never expected or wanted to be, and… it doesn't seem like Oliver deserved it.

On his good days, Jon thinks maybe he didn't, either.

"I'll… consider the offer."

Jon can detect just a hint of curiosity beneath the reticence. Before he can respond, though, he hears the door open and close.

"Can I help you?" Georgie's voice, slicing through the quiet like the crack of a whip.

"Oh, I – I'm a friend," Oliver says quickly, clearly taken by surprise. "Of Jon's."

"Are you, now." The hard edge to her tone turns icy. Jon can't help feeling sorry for Oliver, no doubt pinned under that uncompromising stare of hers.

"Uh, y-yes."

"Right. Just haven't seen you visiting before."

"Um, I've… been out of town!"

If Jon had any control over his body, he would put his head in his hands right now. Apparently Oliver is just as bad at lying on the spot as he is. Unfortunately for Oliver, Georgie happens to be a natural lie detector.

“Right,” Georgie replies flatly. “The nurse didn’t say anyone else was here.”

“Oh! Oh – oh, well. Sorry if I surprised you.”

“It’s fine.”

It’s not.

“I’m Antonio,” Oliver blurts out. Jon cringes with secondhand embarrassment.

“Sure,” Georgie says, voice dripping with disdain. “I think you’re done here.”

“Oh. Uh, right…” Oliver’s chair scrapes against the floor as he stands up. “Have I upset you, miss–”

Bad move. Georgie hates being referred to as 'miss.'

“No, you just remind me of someone.”

“Ah. I’m sorry. Were they–”

“Evil. Yes.”

“Uh. Okay, then.” It’s almost funny, an Avatar of death itself shrinking under Georgie’s scrutiny. Then again, she would likely be a force to be reckoned with even if she hadn’t lost her ability to feel fear. “Well, I just – well, I guess I should just go.”

“I guess you should.”

“Um. Goodbye, Jon. I guess I–”

“Goodbye!” Georgie says, putting on a transparently false cheery tone.

Jon can make out Oliver’s harried footsteps as Georgie ushers him out. Once the door clicks shut, Jon hears her approach him again.

“Sorry about that, Jon, but you really don’t need friends like tha– wait. Did…?” More footsteps; then the door opens again, and Jon hears Georgie’s voice echoing distantly down the corridor. “Hey! Hey, get back here! I need to talk to you!”

Jon wonders if Oliver's already gotten away.

Oh, Jon thinks suddenly, *she’s… not going to be pleased if she finds out I tried to make friends with a death prophet. Neither is Martin, come to think of it.*

Jon feels a twinge of guilt and worry. He’s not yet woken up, and already he’s doing things that Georgie might see as careless and self-destructive. Still… he doesn’t think Oliver is evil, or even particularly threatening. If anything, Jon thinks he knows now how Naomi must have felt, watching some eldritch monster fumble a conversation like any other mundane human grappling with social anxiety.

Well, what’s done is done. Oliver might not even take Jon up on the offer. No use worrying about it at the moment.

He needs to focus on waking up.

Unfortunately, Oliver didn't explain exactly *how* Jon should go about waking up.

His first instinct is to think of Martin. With practiced ease, he reaches out for a memory, and–

Jon has always had an unexpected sweet tooth. He never really mentioned it to any of his coworkers. It's not that he's self-conscious about it; it's more that he just never thought to share unsolicited facts about himself. Most people would take one look at Jon and either assume he takes his tea black, or that he'd prefer to fix it himself – and the latter wasn't an unfair assumption. Martin, though… somehow, he figured it out.

It took some trial-and-error, though at the time, Jon never noticed that Martin was deliberately trying to puzzle it out. Eventually he settled on the exact right formula, and Jon – well, by the time he realized, it felt like too much time had passed to remark on it. He was never very good at compliments anyway, giving or receiving. From that point forward, though, whenever Jon was having a particularly rough day – which, by their standards, was saying a lot – Martin would make Jon's tea sweeter than usual. It was such a small gesture in the face of the horrors that permeated all of their lives, but in retrospect, it spoke volumes.

Jon took forever to notice all those little gestures. He still feels ashamed of how ungrateful he was back then, but it just never occurred to him that anyone would put that much time or effort into learning his preferences, especially something so inconsequential as how he takes his tea. Jon barely put any thought into his own comfort, let alone that of others.

But Martin isn't like Jon.

Jon has long marveled at how kindness seems to come so naturally to Martin. As much as it might seem like he just preternaturally *knows* the exact right things to say and do when he sees someone hurting, though, it was never effortless: Martin cares deliberately, painstakingly, actively. He prides himself on that attention to detail, on all the little acts of kindness and consideration that, when put together, make him the most thoughtful person Jon has ever met.

Of course, Jon also feels a wrench in his heart every time he thinks about how and why Martin cultivated that caretaker skill set in the first place. They talked about a lot of things, after the Lonely, and the truth had come out little by little: Martin had never had anyone in his life who loved him unconditionally. From an early age, he tried desperately to curry favor with a mother who resented him for reasons he could not help and that she would never explain. It bled into all areas of his life. Every adult role model, every passing friendship, each of his few short-lived intimate relationships was a link in a long chain of appeasing and sacrificing and carefully policing himself to meet others' expectations at the cost of his own vivid inner life – and never once did he receive anything meaningful in return. For too long, Jon was a link in that chain himself.

Martin had learned to measure his worth by whether and how he could be of use to others, and always found himself wanting. Jon could relate to that unhealthy preoccupation with making himself useful, but for him, it manifested as workaholic tendencies, harsh self-criticism, and a fear of letting anyone get so close that it would actually hurt when they inevitably grew tired of him. At the time, he would have said he just had a preference for his own company. (Funny, in retrospect, considering he's never been good company for himself.) Martin sought to be noticed and loved; Jon ran headlong in the other direction, unable to tolerate the vulnerability of being known or the risk of being abandoned.

He suspects that Martin would be compassionate regardless of his circumstances. And it's admirable, it's beautiful, it's brave, and Jon loves that about him – but Martin shouldn't have had to go through hell in the process of nurturing that trait. Trauma didn't help him grow. It only twisted his definition of caring until it became an instrument of self-harm. As they navigated their relationship, Martin did get better at setting boundaries and communicating his needs. It never made him any less caring towards Jon or anyone else. He just learned that he deserved compassion as well - from others *and* from himself.

Jon will always be in awe of how after everything – how Jon treated him in the beginning, how Jon left him alone and grieving in the aftermath of the Unknowing, how thoroughly the Lonely pervaded his life – Martin never once lost that instinct. He admitted to Jon that by the time Peter threw him into the Lonely, caring didn't feel natural anymore. He was too numb and isolated to really feel a connection to other people. His empathy had been drained away. But even in its absence, Martin still made the conscious decision to care. He still thought that human connection and compassion were important, even if he believed that he couldn't experience those things himself.

After the world ended, when Jon was deep in his grief and hopelessness, Martin stayed by his side. Jon told him that it was no longer a world where they could trust comfort – and Martin responded with patience and kindness. He put comfort into a world where it seemed like none

could exist. Jon will always be in awe of how Martin could just… do that, and with such confidence – with such *stubbornness*.

I think our experience of the universe has value, Martin had told Simon Fairchild once. *Even if it disappears forever.*

It didn't matter to Martin whether or not the universe noticed or witnessed or cared. What mattered was that *he* cared, and the fact that he cared would never go away – even when the inevitable day came when there was no one and nothing left to remember them. Those stubborn acts of compassion meant something to him in the moment, and their meaning lingered long after Jon lost him.

To hope, to care, to try – these things had meaning; these things were *worth* it, no matter how bleak circumstances became. It mattered to Martin, and so it mattered to Jon. As an anchor, it paled in comparison to actually having Martin at his side, but Jon held fast to it all the same: a reminder of the kinder, gentler side of humanity that could be kept alive even at the end of the world, even in the face of untold horrors and insurmountable odds. Time and time again, it was a lighthouse that kept him from getting lost in the Archive's sea of terrible knowledge.

And right now, Martin is Lonely, but he isn't lost. He'll be okay. He *has* to be. Jon just has to find his way back to him. He's done it before; he can do it again. He just has to wake up.

"–m trying – help – came to me."

Lost in thought, Jon almost doesn't register the voices. They've been there in the background for a few minutes now, he realizes belatedly – they just hadn't penetrated his conscious awareness. It's like listening through six feet of soil – he curses his brain for immediately reaching for *that* mental image – and he strains to translate the dampened noise into coherent words.

"I came to Melanie."

Georgie!

“Well, sorry. Right now, I’m it.”

Distantly, Jon can hear the steady ticking of a clock. He spares a moment to be thankful that he couldn’t hear it the entire time he was asleep. It would have made his restlessness even more intolerable, and – as his thoughts veer off track, the voices go muffled again. *Damn it.*

It takes him a few seconds to refocus his attention.

“– don’t know why this guy would have left a tape recorder?”

Basira.

“You’re the detective,” Georgie says.

“And you’re sure it was him who left it?”

“I mean, the nurses said there were no others visitors, so…” Georgie takes a breath. “Unless it appeared by magic?” A pause; Jon can practically hear Basira’s eyebrows raise. “What, seriously?”

“I don’t know,” Basira sighs. “The whole tape thing is… I don’t know.”

To be honest, Jon doesn’t Know, either. That was always one of the things that the Beholding kept to itself, much to his chagrin.

“Right, well… I showed you like you asked, so–”

Breathe, Jon tells himself. *Time to wake up.*

"Shh," Basira interrupts. Jon can hear movement nearby. "Down here."

Come on. Inhale–

Jon can feel his lungs expand ever so slightly.

"I *told* you."

Good. Exhale, now.

Jon's lungs contract, and some of the feeling starts to come into his extremities. He experimentally tries to move his hands and one of his fingers twitches, brushing against the coarse hospital linens. At least it's *something.*

"This is the one?"

Wake up, Jon, he tells himself, attempting to overlay his thoughts with compulsion. He tries to wiggle his toes, but it doesn't seem like they've gotten the memo just yet. *This is the part where you woke up before. Just – just wake up–*

"Sure."

Jon feels a brief stab of panic – *Why can't I wake up?* – and then he feels his heart stutter in his chest. A telltale pins-and-needles sensation begins to spread in his fingers and – this is probably the first time he's been relieved to experience the precursors to a panic attack.

It's a good sign, he tells himself. *You're connected to your body again, so just–*

“You don’t *sound* very sure,” Basira says.

It isn’t working. Why isn’t it working?

Come on, open your eyes–

“I mean – I don’t know. It might be a different model, maybe? I thought it was *plastic* – but yeah.”

Just sit up, just – ***wake up, Jon.***

Nothing.

Neither Basira nor Georgie speak. The ticking of the clock is deafening.

Wait, Jon thinks. *What if…*

“So what does it mean?” Georgie says eventually.

Open your eyes, Archivist.

His eyes fly open and he sits bolt upright with a gasp.

“Jon!” Georgie yelps, as Basira simultaneously breathes, *“Jesus.”*

Clutching his throat with one hand, Jon continues to struggle for air in deep, rasping gulps. Each breath comes with a wrenching pain and an uncomfortable tightness in his chest, his lungs protesting after months of disuse and refusing to completely expand, feeling as though they're packed with shattered glass.

Eventually, although he can still only manage half-breaths, he looks up at Georgie and Basira. Intending to apologize for startling them, he opens his mouth and–

The tape recorder under his bed clicks on with an earsplitting, static-leaden whine.

Both women start again, and Jon's posture goes rigid, his other hand coming up to rest against his throat.

Sorry, he tries to say again, but nothing comes out, and the tape recorder emits another blast of white noise.

Basira and Georgie are watching him closely now – Georgie with concern, Basira with suspicion. Jon looks back with terrified eyes, panic blanketing him with a weight reminiscent of the Buried.

No, Jon thinks to himself, *not again*–

As his vision starts to blur, both trembling hands leave his neck and reach up to cover his mouth.

"Jon," Georgie says gently, approaching his bedside again, "what's wrong?"

Jon's eyes squeeze shut and he shakes his head frantically. He tries desperately to stifle the whimper building in his chest, but it's creeping up on him anyway.

“Breathe, Jon.” When Georgie rests her hand gently on his shoulder, he flinches violently away. She pulls back, holding both hands up palms-out in a pacifying gesture. “Okay,” she says evenly, “okay. No touching.”

Jon has had these episodes for most of his life. Georgie witnessed more than a few while they were dating, though they were nowhere near as frequent then as they are now. It's been awhile, but Georgie easily slips into the same soothing tone she would always use.

His brain is already tuning her out, though.

I can’t – I can’t–

The Archive prowls forward and settles in just behind his eyes, an opportunistic vulture watching intently for its next meal. If he really needs to use his voice, the library is available for reference. There are plenty of statements from which he can borrow. If it isn't enough, he can always curate more. He just has to–

No – please, no–

Who is he even talking to?

Jon draws his knees up and locks his arms around them, curling his shoulders in and hunching forward to hide his face. He takes a shuddering breath in. It comes out as a strangled sob. The tears brimming in his eyes finally spill over, sending twin streaks trickling down his cheeks.

What is he supposed to do now?

Chapter End Notes

- Shorter chapter than usual this time since it was originally part of the previous chapter, BUT that kind of felt like a good place to end it for now. I hope to have Chapter 7 ready to go by early next week. Now we REALLY get into some S4 canon divergence.

- Oliver's dialogue to Jon (up until the point where he starts having an actual conversation with Jon) is from MAG 121; Georgie & Oliver's dialogue is from MAG 121; Georgie & Basira's dialogue (up until the point where Jon wakes up) is from MAG 122.

- So! For those who like Archive-speak Jon: yes there will be more of that starting next chapter. For those who don't: there will still be original dialogue too. I like writing him both ways too much, so expect a mix from here on out. (Some chapters may have more or less depending on what state Jon's in at any given moment. I'm playing around with some concepts.)

- I should probably note at this point that a lot of how I write Jon's ADHD, anxiety, and other mental health stuff is influenced by my own experiences with neurodivergence. It doesn't mean everyone experiences these diagnoses/symptoms in the same way, though. c:

- Cross-posted to tumblr here.

Zombie, Redux

Chapter Summary

In which Jon answers some pressing questions. Or tries to, anyway.

Chapter Notes

CWs for Chapter 7: panic attack/shutdown; hospital/ICU imagery. Jon meets his apparent quota of one (1) allowed Big Swear per chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There are hushed voices coming from somewhere deep below the unbroken whine of static filling his ears. Nearer, Georgie is saying something, but her words are too garbled for Jon to wring any meaning out of them. He isn't sure *exactly* how long it's been since he woke up, but he can feel his muscles cramping from holding the same position for some time now, curled tight and taut and small.

...catatonia: a state of –

Fuck off, Jon thinks dully.

At least he's not crying anymore. That stopped some time ago, all of a sudden between one moment and the next. Now he just feels hollowed out and raw. He knows what he would see if he looked in the mirror: puffy, reddened eyes, so reminiscent of a human – but with a glint of something hungry and monstrous behind them. Any sympathy or concern that anyone might feel at first glance would be quashed with one long look into those eyes, leaving only fear and revulsion and hostility in their wake. And they would be right to fight or flee or freeze, just as they might when confronted with any other predator.

Jon keeps his eyes closed.

“– a sedative,” comes an unfamiliar voice, finally reaching him through the haze.

“Does he *look* like he needs a sedative?”

Basira, Jon recognizes.

“We – we should really do some – some tests…” The first voice trails off uncertainly. A nurse, Jon assumes. He can feel the apprehension coming off them in waves.

No one knows what to do with him. There is no standard of care for a patient who spent the last six months as a seeming corpse with frantic brain activity as its only signs of life.

A zombie, Jon recalls wryly. The statement calls to him from within Basira’s bag: a taunt, a balm, and a poison all at once. He pushes the thought of it away.

None of the hospital staff like entering his room, he Knows. They certainly don’t want to deal with him now he’s awake. His circumstances present a medical marvel – the kind of mystery that most researchers would kill for a chance to study – but their curiosity has been tempered by that overpowering sense of wrongness emanating from him. They are wisely dissuaded by the sheer dread of coming close to something so unquestionably inhuman.

Most people aren’t so curious that they would run headlong towards an ominous fate like the first person to die in a horror film, he supposes. It’s just one more way in which Jon was – *is* – such an easy target for someone like Jonah Magnus.

Distantly, Jon can feel himself start to shiver.

There’s movement to his right as Georgie sits on the edge of the bed, within arm’s reach but careful to leave a buffer of empty space between them. She tells him that he’s safe – *he’s not, and neither is anyone else while he still exists in the world* – and that she’s here – *for now, but once she realizes how far gone he is, she’ll leave again* – and that they’ll sort it all out – *yes, and when they do, they’ll never stop looking at him like he’s a monster, and isn’t he?*

The door closes behind the nurse, but the fear lingers for several minutes afterwards, like blood diffusing through water.

“Jon,” Basira begins, her tone resolute and impersonal.

“Give him a minute,” Georgie says.

“He’s *had* a minute. He’s had six months.” There is no malice in her voice, only a bone-deep exhaustion. Basira has been carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders since the Unknowing. She’s barely had a chance to mourn Daisy; she’s wound tight from hypervigilance, made worse by the Flesh’s attack on the Archives; she’s had to put practicality above all else, because sentimentality is a luxury that has long since been stolen from her. “He needs to answer some questions.”

Georgie huffs and turns back to Jon.

“Jon, can you hear me?”

He nods without looking up.

“Are you nonverbal?”

Jon can feel a faraway part of himself balk at the clinical flavor of the word. Intellectually, he can appreciate having a term to summarize nebulous human experiences like this. Emotionally, he has difficulty tolerating how exposed the practical application of those terms makes him feel.

Besides, the word doesn’t really apply to this situation, does it? Not in the traditional sense, at least. Not completely. So he shakes his head *no.*

He takes a deep breath and reluctantly looks inward to the Archive. There's a spark of excitement, or relief, or maybe smug vindication from that alien part of himself when he finally gives in to the need, and he tries his best to ignore it and get it over with. He doesn't delve too deeply, instead settling on the first thing that might work.

"I'm sorry, it won't let me say the words," he says, voice strained and scratchy with months of neglect.

"O…kay," Georgie says. "I guess that's a no?"

"Hmm." Basira doesn't say anything else.

Jon starts picking through his library again, but nothing jumps out at him. His thoughts feel sluggish, his mind packed with cotton. Or cobweb. Usually he'd shudder at that thought, but right now, he's just too tired for that familiar fear to actually reach him through all the fog. He's just spent months literally sleeping like the dead; why is he so *tired?*

When a full minute passes without a reply, Basira speaks up again.

"Georgie, could you give us some time alone?"

"No." The immediacy of the refusal surprises Jon. He feels Georgie's eyes on him, and he tenses. "I'm staying, Jon."

"I need to talk to him."

"Then talk to him."

"I thought you didn't want to be involved in Institute business."

Georgie hesitates, and Jon finally looks up at her. He's careful not to make eye contact. *It's alright,* he wants to say, *you don't have to stay* – but he can't.

"…anyone who doesn't want to be a part of it, they can…" Jon says instead, faltering when he can't find a good way to express the rest.

Back to the charades, I suppose, he thinks sullenly. He holds one hand out and walks the middle and index finger of his other hand across his upturned palm.

"Why are you–" Georgie cuts herself off with a short exhale. "Do you *want* me to stay?"

Jon bites his lip. *"Probably putting you in danger.*"

"Yeah, probably, but that's not the question I asked." She sighs when she sees Jon's blank expression. "Look, the only way I can think to approach all of… *this* is to break it into smaller pieces. It doesn't mean I'm committing to anything else, it doesn't mean that I can't change my mind, it doesn't mean that I can't walk away later. I'm not asking whether I *should* stay, and I'm not offering to get involved indefinitely or unconditionally. Right this moment, all I'm asking is whether you *want* me to physically leave this room – *for now* – and come back later."

For a few minutes, Jon says nothing. If the question had been whether it's safe to be near him, she already knows that his answer would be an emphatic *no.* Unlike him, Georgie knows when to cut her losses and leave. It would be condescending to assume that she needs him to protect her from her own choices, especially considering how, of the two of them, she's the one who actually has a self-preservation instinct. She doesn't have a choice, really. She can't feel fear – one of the most basic survival tools – and as a result, she has to evaluate her circumstances much more constantly and painstakingly than others.

It must be exhausting, Jon thinks to himself. He knows what hypervigilance is like. Even if Georgie can't experience the fear that goes along with it, it probably still saps her energy in much the same way.

He tries to force himself back on track. The question: Does he want her to *physically* leave *in this moment?*

No. He really, *really* doesn't.

Jon closes his eyes, and Naomi's statement is the first thing his mind touches: *"Could you stay please?"*

"Okay." Georgie looks at Basira. "I'm staying."

Jon feels some of the tension leave his shoulders, but he can't help feeling selfish.

"Are you really okay with that?" Basira says, eyeing Jon. He can detect the unspoken question: *You know what I'm going to ask. Do you really want her to hear the answer?*

He does. Georgie deserves to know. They all do. What he *doesn't* want is to hear what she has to say to him after the truth comes out.

But he nods anyway.

"Fine. What are you?" Basira says without preamble.

"'Are you secretly a monster?' probably would have been a great opener," Jon says acidly.

He flinches as the words leave his mouth. They were Sasha's once – the *real* Sasha – said with a hint of playfulness, but now they just sound bitter. He's fully aware that he has an overflowing stock of resentment bottled up inside him, hidden somewhere deep underneath all the layers of guilt and grief and self-loathing, but he wasn't expecting the vitriol to slip out quite so easily. He really, *really* can't afford to start burning bridges, especially so early on.

But Basira seems unruffled.

“Alright,” she says with a shrug. “Are you?”

It’s complicated, he does not say.

When he reaches up to run a hand through his hair, the movement jostles the hospital bracelet affixed to it, catching his eye. He brings his hand back down and stares at it, hanging loosely from his wrist. He’s always been scrawny, but his arms look thinner than usual. Fragile. With a pang, he notices the scarring on his wrists, left there from where the ropes cut into him during his month in captivity with the Circus. By the time the world ended, they had faded somewhat. As they are now, they’re impossible to miss.

SIMS, JONATHAN, the wristband reads. Date of birth. Sex. Blood type. Patient identification number. Barcode. An allergy alert: amoxicillin.

Is he still human enough here in the past for an allergic reaction to pose a threat? He could Know, he supposes, but–

“Jon?” Basira prompts.

He sighs, closes his eyes, and consults the Archive once again.

“It seemed almost human, from a distance, but as it got closer, I saw that it was–”

Jon quickly skims through statements looking for an appropriate fragment.

“...some newly-birthed monster,” he settles on. It’s blunt, and a bit petulant, but he may as well be honest. He resigns himself to whatever comes next.

Martin would have hated to hear him think like this.

Martin's not here, some destructive, cruel part of his mind supplies.

"Why are you talking like that?" There's the faintest tinge of aggravation in Basira's tone now.

Before Jon can answer, Georgie gives him a skeptical, chiding look. "I doubt it's that simple, Jon. Why don't you try that again?"

"I could see myself becoming one of those people and I fought very hard against the feeling of wrongness that seemed to be trying to worm itself into my mind," he amends. Better. Probably more accurate, if he's being kind to himself. (He's rarely kind to himself.)

"That sounds more constructive than just giving up and deciding you're a monster," Georgie says.

She must be baffled by the unusual quality of his speech, but it seems she's trying not to draw attention to it. Probably thinks it's some neurological aftereffect of the coma. Not-coma. *Whatever.* Who is he kidding? Georgie is sharp. She must suspect that this is some supernatural nonsense – and there's a simple, straightforward way to confirm it for her.

"I don't think I'll ever be the same person I was before."

"I think that could be said of anyone. We all change from moment to moment, and – wait." Georgie gives him a shrewd look as she registers the cadence with which he speaks. It's undeniably familiar, but it's not *him*. It's his voice, but those aren't his words. "Was that *my*…"

"Statement – regarding the last words of a possible corpse," Jon says wearily.

“Jon,” Basira says, her eyes widening just barely, “are you *quoting statements?”*

“The words repeated, as though on a recorded loop.” He gives an affirmative nod, just in case his meaning is unclear – which is often the case.

“Care to explain why?”

“I started to say something – but my voice died in my throat,” he says.

Then: *“…but it – it didn’t seem to be working right; all I could hear from it was the – faint noise of static, and…”*

They probably don’t care how it *feels,* though, do they? They just want to know what it makes him now. His hands flutter in agitation as he tries to redirect, mind racing to find another statement.

“Okay, alright, I get the gist,” Basira says. There is a long, considering pause. “Can you just… write it down?”

The simple answer is *no,* but the easiest way to make them understand is with a demonstration. He holds one palm flat and with the other hand mimics writing on it.

Reaching into her bag, Basira produces a small notepad with a pen stuffed into the wire spiral binding. Jon pulls the pen out, rips the cap off with his teeth, and–

“Seriously, Jon?” Basira complains.

“Honestly, what did you expect?” Georgie snorts. “You can’t tell me Jon’s desk *isn’t* a graveyard of gnawed-up pens.”

Jon manages a tiny smirk at that. Most people were well-acquainted with his treatment of writing utensils after the first week of working alongside him. It had quickly become an office joke. About a month into his tenure as Head Archivist, he'd managed to chomp down on an exploded ballpoint pen. Tim had found him at the bathroom sink twenty minutes later, still trying to get the ink off his face and hands – and, of course, never let him live it down.

Well, until Jon burned the bridge between them, anyway. The good-humored ribbing and inside jokes gradually dwindled away, only to be replaced with corrosive distrust and resentment.

Jon's smile fades just as rapidly as it had appeared. He flips to an empty page of the notebook.

He sets out with the intention to write a sentence of his own: *Regardless of the mode of communication – verbal, written, sign – I can only borrow from statements.*

It sounds too stiff, too academic, but it doesn't matter. The moment the tip of the pen touches paper, Jon's hand seizes. The tape recorder underneath the bed emits a brief crackle. When Jon tries to press down and begin writing, his fingers and wrist start convulsively twitching. A scalding pain starts to seep through his fingers and crawl up his arm, the recorder's static oscillating along in time with the throbbing. When it upsweeps into a shrill screech, Georgie starts.

"Jon–"

Picking the pen up off the page, Jon holds up one trembling finger: *Wait.*

With a pained hiss, he shakes his hand out until the ache recedes. When he starts writing this time, it's with the intention of reproducing a verbatim line from the statement of Jane Prentiss, regarding a wasps' nest in her attic: *I have tried to write it down, to put it into terms and words you could understand.*

The words flow easily. The handwriting is a nearly illegible scrawl, but that has nothing to do with the Archive. Jon has always had poor handwriting, and it's only gotten worse since his

encounter with Jude. While his dominant hand is still usable, the burn scar contracture still affects his mobility and coordination to some extent.

He's tried grabbing individual words from statements to piece together a novel sentence before, but just like *speaking* a single word in isolation replays every instance of it recorded in the Archive and leaves him reeling in the aftermath, trying to *write* a standalone word is risky. When he writes a word with the express intention of removing it from the context of a statement, every occurrence of the word floods him all at once. The force of it always overwhelms him before he can even start on the next word in his intended sentence. Usually he ends up dropping his writing utensil. Sometimes he passes out. Always it's unpleasant.

It's as if whatever power is enforcing the rules knows when he's trying to bend them. Or Knows, more likely. Assuming he can assign self-awareness to the Ceaseless Watcher, that is.

Stop, he tells his wayward brain. *Stay on task.*

He shoves the pen back into the notebook's spiral binding and hands it back to Basira, who returns it to her bag. The cap he keeps for himself, rolling it between his fingers.

"What about BSL?" Georgie suggests.

Jon shakes his head *no.*

"How do you know?" Basira asks.

There are two answers to that. The first is that he just Knows. The second is that he's tried. Martin knows a limited amount of signs, but Jon's hands never cooperated when he tried to copy Martin's motions. His fingers never wanted to curl into the correct shapes, his joints would lock up, and subtle movements would turn into violent tremors. Once, in a fit of stubborn frustration, he kept pushing back against the thing controlling his body. His arms went limp and numb, and he couldn't use them for hours after.

Simple nonverbal signals – nodding, shaking his head, giving a thumbs up – seem to be, for the most part, whitelisted. Most charades and expressionistic gestures will also pass through the Archive's filter. Formalized signing, though, is usually blocked.

The deciding factors seem to be intentionality and whether or not an attempt at communication is deemed to fit the definition of formal language. Sign languages, systems of writing, spoken words – all off-limits unless being used to reproduce the Archive's existing records. The more imprecise and abstract the attempted communication, the more likely it is to escape the Archive's strict conceptualization of language.

He and Martin experimented a bit with illustration and found mixed success. It was difficult to ascertain any concrete limits. More abstract drawings are easier to produce, but it tends to leave him drained and with a splitting headache regardless of how successful the attempt is. Intent typically seems to matter more than the result – which is probably for the best. Jon is no more of an artist than he is a poet, and it shows.

Any time Jon tried to ask the Beholding for clarification on the rules governing his new-and-impaired communication abilities, it gave him nothing but static in return. He and Martin had to find things out mostly by trial-and-error. Luckily for Jon, Martin is observant and intuitive when it comes to reading people, *and* he's a poet with a mind for the abstract. He was usually able to interpret Jon's meaning with alarming speed and precision, and whenever Jon grew frustrated with his inability to express himself in a way that felt *right,* Martin would pose yes-or-no questions to help him narrow it down. He would always keep going until Jon was satisfied that he was understood. Even when they were in disagreement.

But Martin isn't here, Jon's treacherous brain reminds him again.

"Let me guess," Basira sighs. "You just *know."*

Jon gives a tired shrug. Even if he could use his own words, he may have had the same response. He's never managed to have a conversation about his ability to Know that didn't leave him feeling defeated. Sometimes it doesn't seem worth trying to explain.

"Alright," Basira mutters to herself, rubbing her temples now. "This makes things more complicated."

You think? Jon wants to snap. He's thankful that he can't. None of this is Basira's fault; she doesn't deserve his ire.

"So, what does this *mean?"* she continues.

"I often find myself locked in a sense of esoteric paralysis on how to proceed," Jon quips, borrowing from Adelard Dekker this time. He wonders if Dekker would have tried to kill him on the spot. He wonders whether he would have been right to do so.

Georgie stifles a laugh. Jon can hear the relief coloring it, and one corner of his mouth twitches into a smile again. She's intimately familiar with his ill-timed gallows humor, and the fact that he can still draw on it so readily is a good sign. Another small piece of evidence added to the *Jonathan-Sims-isn't-too-far-gone* column. She *wants* to believe it's still him, he Knows, and wants to believe that he can get better – but there's still a tiny, nagging ghost of doubt somewhere deep in her mind. He doesn't blame her for that.

Basira isn't as amused.

"Jon," she groans, "please be serious."

"It was definitely human once I could see, as it grasped desperately" – a skip ahead – *"it was trying to say: 'I'm sorry.'"*

"It's fine, just…" She sighs. "*Try* to answer the question."

Jon closes his eyes again, brow furrowing in concentration.

"…so aware of the position I'm in, and keen to use that power to actually help people." Referencing Tova McHugh's statement makes him nauseous – the hatred and disgust he felt the first time he read it was directed at himself as much as it was at her. But it's a fair

comparison, considering what he was doing back then. *"I'm trying to do good,"* he adds, and hopes it sounds more sincere than Tova's flimsy rationalizations ever did.

As expected, Basira looks unconvinced.

"Look, Jon, a lot has happened–"

"He already knows," Georgie interrupts. "We talked – in the dreams, you know. About Tim and Daisy and Martin. And… and Melanie. He's the one who told me about the bullet."

"I thought Melanie figured it out on her own." Basira's eyes narrow as she looks at Jon. "How did you–"

"He said he knows things because of the Eye." Georgie gives him a look that he can't quite parse. Sympathetic, maybe? An undercurrent of disappointment, but without accusation. Frustration, but not directed at him – rather, it's *for* him, on his behalf. "And he said that when he woke up, he would explain everything where Elias couldn't overhear, but…"

"Maybe somewhere in your library are the words to explain what happened," Jon says, unable to mask his dejection. *"I suppose I'll just have to try."*

"Still want to wait and do it in the tunnels?" Georgie waits for Jon's affirmative. "Fair enough. I brought you a change of clothes." Jon gives her a questioning look. "I've been bringing a bag each time I visit for the last couple weeks, in case you woke up. Just some things you left at my flat. I couldn't find any trousers, so I just grabbed a pair of my joggers – which are definitely too big for you, but I figured you'd prefer that over a hospital gown."

Jon feels a grateful smile tug at his lips. He didn't expect this level of consideration, doesn't *deserve–*

"We should probably wait until a doctor signs off on your release, though." Georgie stands and starts to move towards the door. "I'll go to the nurse's station, and–"

Jon shakes his head. *"I cannot imagine what they would have thought of a person who could not die."*

"Well, you can't just walk out of here. I don't care how inhuman you think you are, you still need to be cleared for discharge."

"I've no interest in becoming a resident medical marvel."

It's a hollow excuse. The first time around, the hospital staff couldn't wait to rush him out the door. He doubts they'd ever processed a discharge so quickly before or since.

"Just *stay here.*" He's halfway to ripping off his ECG sensors when she shoots him a stern warning glare. "Leave them."

Jon responds with a peevish huff. Those sensors haven't been connected to anything since the first week he was here. No one wanted to hear the incessant flatline, and–

Suddenly, he Knows all about the heated argument that was had regarding his DNR status. He had no next-of-kin to consult, so they were hesitant to mark him as DNR in advance. That meant that, since he was unresponsive – and since his case was so unprecedented as to make any speculation regarding an outcome impossible – they should have been trying to resuscitate him.

But they'd already tried that, and the consensus was that he should have been declared dead by the first responders. (Rumor was that his *boss* of all people had managed to convince them to bring him to the hospital for treatment instead.) Under normal circumstances they would have declared time of death several times over by now and moved him to the morgue – except that brain death hadn't occurred, and it didn't seem like the absence of a pulse or respiration was having any effect on *that* in the slightest. Didn't that render the entire discussion altogether moot?

And then Jon Knows how the only reason he was admitted and examined for brain activity in the first place was because Elias had a brief chat with the director of the hospital. He was, as always, very persuasive.

"I don't want to hear it," Georgie says when she hears Jon sigh. She stops at the threshold and looks back at him again just as he starts fiddling with the IV cannula in the crook of his arm. He freezes and folds his hands in his lap, like a toddler caught reaching for the cookie jar. "Jonathan Sims, you'd better still be in bed when I come back."

Jon rolls his eyes, but stays put. As Georgie leaves the room, Basira lets out a soft chuckle.

"No wonder she and Melanie get on so well."

Jon refocuses at the mention of Melanie's name. He makes a circular motion with one hand: *Go on.* When Basira gives him a blank look, he has a quick rummage through his catalog.

"...see any obvious signs of previous slaughter." Trevor Herbert's statement leaves a nasty taste in his mouth, but given Basira's expression, it seems to have gotten his point across.

"Oh, the bullet?" Jon gives an enthusiastic nod. "Yeah, we, uh… we removed it. Melanie was reluctant at first, but I guess Georgie won her over. She's… recovering. Physically, at least. She's still angry, but not like before. Mostly, she just seems lost. And…"

Basira hesitates.

"...whatever protection it might have afforded you is severed."

"Don't read my mind, Jon," Basira snaps.

Jon shakes his head: *I didn't.*

“Whatever.” She drops into the chair next to his bed. He can see the fatigue in the way her shoulders slump. Basira has always had excellent posture, but right now, she looks ready to crumple. “Brought you a statement, by the way. If you want a fix before we leave.”

Something famished and greedy rears up inside him. It’s only with some difficulty that he manages to force it back. He can feel Basira watching him intently, and he avoids meeting her gaze.

“Well? Do you want it or not? You have that hungry look to you.”

Involuntarily, Jon’s eyes flick to Basira’s bag. He squeezes them shut again, shaking his head.

“Hm.”

Jon opens one eye and chances a glimpse of Basira. Her poker face is as flawless as always.

It’s stale anyway, he tells the persistent thing inside him. *You’ve already got that one. Just pull it up and reread it if you want it so badly.*

It continues scratching at the door.

Can’t you just be satisfied with Oliver’s statement and go back to lurking?

He isn’t sure why he’s acting like the craving belongs to something *other*. The Archivist, the Archive – they’re both *him,* even if they feel distinct from the human he used to be. It just helps sometimes, to talk to those parts of himself as if they’re backseat drivers. He used to do the same thing to his intrusive thoughts, back when he was still his own person. It wasn’t difficult to adapt his inner monologue to apply it to the Eye’s influence, even if it is ultimately a self-delusion.

When Georgie returns, the nurse trailing behind her looks like she would rather be literally anywhere else.

Here we go, Jon thinks sourly.

The hospital staff are clearly out of their depth. As it turns out, a rotating cast of specialists have been overseeing his case throughout the past six months, but each of them did so for only as long as it took to hand him off to the next unlucky person in line.

Once he's disconnected from all the (mostly inoperative) sensors and monitors, a nurse – *he drew the short straw,* Jon Knows – goes through the motions of taking his vitals a final time. Jon does him the courtesy of keeping his eyes lowered and tries to ignore the way the man avoids turning his back. He does not speak except to give short instructions – *sit up, lay back, hold your arm out straight, take a deep breath* – and Jon obeys without saying anything in return.

The current attending physician on duty makes only a cursory show of evaluating his condition. During the brief neurological assessment, she makes no comment on the fact that Jon hasn't verbally answered any questions or even said a word. She's barely there for twenty minutes before announcing that she should go work on his discharge papers.

"Shouldn't he have a treatment plan?" Georgie tries. "Or – or referrals for follow-up, or something?"

"I, ah, have to discuss things with his treatment team," the doctor says, already halfway out the door.

She doesn't, Jon Knows. He hasn't had a treatment team since the first month he was admitted.

"This is ridiculous," Georgie mutters as the door closes.

Jon reaches out to touch her arm, and shakes his head when she looks at him.

"It *is.* It's unprofessional."

"Understandably, I think – it was entirely my own fault."

"Stop that. You're still a patient, you deserve some sort of – continuity of care." When Jon chuckles, Georgie shoots him an indignant look. "What? You *do."*

Now that there are no lines restricting his movement, he's finally able to stretch properly. Doing so yields a series of devastating cracks and pops from his joints, and Georgie gives him a horrified look. He just raises his eyebrows at her: *What?*

When he sidles to the edge of the bed and puts his feet on the floor, Georgie stops him with a hand on his shoulder.

"Are you sure you're going to be able to stand?"

No, he's not, but if he has to sit here a moment longer he's going to lose his goddamn mind.

Predictably enough, he does have trouble standing on his own at first, but Georgie has no problem supporting his weight. Even when they were dating, she probably could have picked him up if he'd let her, and he weighs even less now. The bathroom is small, and he waves her off when she offers to help him dress. She hasn't seen the extent of the scarring on his body, and he'd rather her not. Once he demonstrates his ability to stand using the handrail, she agrees to wait outside, but she stands near the door just in case.

Jon shouldn't be able to stand at all, this soon after waking up from a six-month coma. He should have more muscle atrophy. He should need extensive physical rehab. He should still

be in *bed.* Hell, he should probably be in some research facility somewhere, being poked and prodded and tested every which way.

He keeps waiting for the moment Georgie decides it's all too much, tells him to take care of himself, and leaves.

Although he's been here before and he knows what to expect, he still has to brace himself before looking at his reflection in the mirror. He's haggard. Gaunt. His hair isn't as long as it was where – *when* – he came from, only barely touching his shoulders now. It needs a wash. The burn on his hand is almost fully healed, but newer-looking than he's used to. Same familiar dark circles under his eyes; same familiar speckling of shiny, pockmarked worm scars. His ribs are visible, and – he's hit with a bolt of panic in the split second before he remembers that, yes, twelve pairs of ribs is the normal amount that he *should* have. Hopefully this time he can keep all of them.

The eyes staring back at him – only two – are still his own for now, back to the deep brown they'd been for most of his life before the Archive claimed its place. But he can see something sinister skulking behind them even now, and he knows that everyone else will be able to see it, too.

When he emerges dressed in a *What the Ghost* hoodie two sizes too big and practically swimming in a pair of Georgie's joggers, he's surprised to see that she's still here. That she hasn't changed her mind and written him off yet.

"Better?" she asks, and he nods appreciatively, if a bit timidly. "Sorry it's not more your size."

Jon doesn't care. He hasn't been this comfortable in… well, he doesn't feel like calculating the time frame of the apocalypse. He doesn't wait for the Beholding's disapproval to hit him before he sends it a silent rebuff. At this point, it's just reflex.

"I found you a wheelchair," Basira says from across the room. "Just in case you need it."

The measured look she gives him makes him feel like he's being tested. It makes sense. The speedier his recovery, the less human he seems. But he isn't going to feign infirmity. They deserve the truth from him.

There *is* a familiar dull ache in his bad leg, though. He could do with a cane, but his should be in his office about this time, and he doesn't want Georgie to have to support half his weight until he has a chance to retrieve it.

"Well?"

He wavers a moment longer, then nods an affirmative and has a seat.

Just then, the door opens and a nurse enters, a new one this time. Jon makes the mistake of looking up, and when their eyes meet, he Knows that she has a story to tell.

The sound he makes as he claps his hands over his eyes is something like a strangled, panicked whimper.

"Jon?" Georgie places a hand on his shoulder.

"Oh, um… sorry if I startled you, uh – Mr. Sims. I have some paperwork here, we just need some signatures before you–"

When she was nine years old, she was playing with friends in a drainage ditch. It was nearly dusk when they dared her to enter the tunnel, but she always was the bravest of them. She–

Jon digs the heels of his palms into his eyes until he sees sparks, rocking back and forth slightly to distract himself from the compulsion snaking its roots through his thoughts.

–spent days wandering the gloom, and all the while, the frantic calls of the search parties echoed off the walls. Whenever she tried to call out a response, it would tighten its grip on

her ankle: that warbling, mangled, broken-jawed thing with the–

"Leave it here," Basira says curtly, crossing the room in a few long strides. "I'll bring it to you when we're finished."

Jon can discern the shape of the statement, but it's not enough. He needs her story. She needs to tell it in her own words. She has to walk through that tunnel again, relive every twist and turn and shade of terror, and he has to experience it alongside her, *all eyes–*

"O-okay," the nurse stammers, "I just – I thought I saw–"

–a second shadow, starkly visible even in the deepest dark, all dislocated joints and distorted–

Basira shuts the door on her mid-sentence and turns to face Jon.

"Jon. What was that?"

"...you're not going to give the Watcher a statement," he says, panting shallowly, hands still pressed to his eyelids. *"You're better than that."*

He isn't sure whether he's saying it for himself or for Basira. Both, maybe.

"She… has a statement?" Jon nods. "And you could tell just by looking at her?" Another nod. "That's… hmm."

"I could hear in her voice that she was afraid of him." His elbows dig bruises into his thighs as he leans forward and draws his shoulders in tighter. *"I was, too."*

“Does covering your eyes actually help?” Georgie asks, giving his shoulder a light squeeze. An attempt at grounding him. It helps.

“…it was enough to ease the relentless pressure,” he says, *“if only a little bit.”*

Jon pauses for a moment as he selects another statement.

“…wear a cloth across his face – hold my hand in front of my eyes–”

“Oh,” Georgie says. “Hang on.”

She withdraws her hand, but Jon can still feel her standing over him. A few moments later something is being lowered over his face. He goes rigid.

“It’s just my scarf, Jon. I thought we could use it as a blindfold.” Jon signals assent. “Okay. You can put your hands down now. Just keep your eyes closed.”

He waits patiently while she ties the scarf off at the back of his head and adjusts it, ensuring that it covers his eyes completely.

“Better?”

Jon lets out a shaky breath and nods. It’s a lengthy scarf and one end sits in his lap. He takes it in his hands and runs his fingers over the fabric: a nice texture, soft and warm and comforting. He wonders if – no, Knows now – Georgie knitted it herself.

For a few moments the room is quiet but for the scratching of pen on paper as Basira forges Jon’s signature on the paperwork.

“I’ll go hand this over and then we can get out of here,” she says brusquely. *“Don’t* take off the blindfold until we’re back in the Archives.”

Jon wasn’t planning on it.

Chapter End Notes

- Finished this chapter earlier than I expected. Not sure when the next one will be ready, hopefully sometime next weekend.

- SO. A lot of exposition in this one, but I wanted to try to give a general outline of how Jon's statement-speak works, what limitations he's working with, and what loopholes he's already tried (and failed) to exploit.

- Jon's verbal dialogue in this chapter was taken from statements in the following episodes, in order: MAG 019; 141; 112; 013; 026; 047; 115; 054; 094 (x2); 036; 054; 125; 032 (written not verbal); 156; 123; 155; 021; 064; 029; 010; 139; 042; 151; 125; 097; 099.

- I realize that's... a lot of citations, so if you don't feel like scrolling and counting but you want to know what episode a specific line comes from, feel free to ask and I can tell you, lol.

- Cross-posted to tumblr here.

One Step Forward

Chapter Summary

In which Jon returns to the Archives for the first time since before the world ended - *and has to explain that.*

Chapter Notes

So, heads up: this chapter is almost twice as long as usual, and it contains a LOT of lengthy, dialogue-heavy, roundabout exposition, because it's hard to summarize the end of the world when you can't just come out and say what you mean (and let's be honest, Jon wasn't good at talking about feelings even before all this Archive nonsense ANYWAY).

What I'm trying to say is: I realize it's a lot; thank you for bearing with me, lol.

CWs for Chapter 8: descriptions of past graphic violence, blood & injury (canon-typical; primarily: description of the aftermath of an iconic brutal pipe murder); discussion of past suicidal ideation (mostly passive, but some active also mentioned); panic attack (of a sort); dissociation/drdp; very brief mention of cigarette smoking/nicotine dependence (& internalized ableism re: addiction); some (canon-typical) victim blaming; mild self-harm (mostly: scratching/biting oneself as a stim/during a panic attack); trauma/flashbacks re: dehumanization/having one's bodily autonomy overridden (i.e. Jonah Magnus' usual bastardry); assorted swears.

(I think that's everything. Feel free to give me a heads up if I missed anything - which goes for everything I post, btw.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jon is physically alone for the first time since he woke up, and he hates it.

The tunnel is bleak and empty except for a circle of five rickety chairs, brought down by Basira and Georgie in preparation for their… well, calling it a strategy meeting would be generous. It's bound to be more like an interrogation. A maddening one, considering his current circumstances.

He could sit. He *should* sit. Instead, he paces – nearly limps, really – in circles near the bottom of the ladder leading up to the trapdoor entrance of the tunnels, practically vibrating with restless energy. Every time he puts weight on his bad leg, a shooting pain races from his knee to his hip, like a spark traveling through a live wire. It's grounding, in a way. Still, he probably should have stopped by his office first for his cane.

Or he could just take a seat until Georgie and Basira return with the others, but something about sitting there surrounded by four empty chairs makes his loneliness feel more acute.

Stop being dramatic, he chides himself. *They'll be back soon.*

In his defense, he's always hated the tunnels, and for good reason. Historically, coming down here has often ended badly for him. The trapdoor is still open, which takes some of the edge off, but ultimately it's no more comforting to him than a dying nightlight would be to a child in the throes of sleep paralysis: the monster under the bed might just be a hypnogogic hallucination, but try telling that to a terrified child. Even for an adult, knowing that would be no consolation in the moment, when that alien presence in the darkened room is hovering just overhead.

That's not even a good comparison, though, is it? The monsters that Jon has met down here have all been very, very real.

He scratches absently at his worm scars, trying not to think about Jane Prentiss and the death knell of a writhing, withering hive. He tries not to think about the Distortion, but he still finds himself double-checking the walls for a door that shouldn't be there, dreading its sudden manifestation – he really isn't ready to see Helen again yet. He tries not to think about the NotThem – still down here, just waiting to be set loose again. He tries not to think of Jonah Magnus' undying body waiting in the Panopticon with its empty eye sockets, or Gertrude's remains left moldering for months just under their feet, or what became of Jurgen Leitner – and, of course, now that's *all* he can think about.

Jon has seen worse since then, but that sight haunts him: the unrecognizable lump of meat and bone where the man's face used to be, bits of brain matter and skull fragments littering the floor around him, the steady *drip-drip-drip* of gore from the lead pipe, its end left hanging over the edge of the desk. When Jon returned to work months later, he would still find overlooked droplets of blood spatter from time to time. It was a constant reminder of his own failing. The answers were *right there,* and if he had only stayed to listen to what Leitner had

to say, maybe Jon could have put all the pieces together sooner. But no, he was overwhelmed and frightened, and he ran away instead of staying to deal with it. And he'd needed a cigarette.

It should have been enough to turn him off nicotine, but it *still* took the end of the world for him to leave off smoking. Even then, he'd really only replaced it with a different vice, hadn't he?

Jon nearly jumps out of his skin at the first squeak of a footfall on the top rung of the ladder.

"Well, Martin isn't coming," Basira says as she climbs down.

"So this was all reasonably distressing, but at least it had the advantage of not being unexpected."

Basira reaches the bottom of the ladder and brushes her hands off on her trousers before giving Jon an appraising look.

"I really can't tell if you're being sarcastic, or if that's just the best statement you had lying around."

Jon shrugs. Honestly, it's a little of both.

He *hadn't* been expecting Basira to return with Martin. It seemed safe to assume that the situation with the Lonely would be more or less the same as it had been the last time. Apparently he was right not to get his hopes up.

"Peter's office was locked and no one answered when I called. And Martin's office was empty. Freezing, too, like he was blasting the air conditioning."

"Lends itself to isolation well," Jon says distractedly, still pacing. Well, limping. *"Too well, sometimes."*

You're being ominous again, Martin's voice plays in Jon's head – which brings on alternating waves of affection and grief and worry and, yes, *pining,* all rolled up into a nebulous ball of feeling that Jon… really isn't equipped to untangle right now.

The discord must show on his face, because Basira is staring at him, her expression hovering somewhere between unimpressed and curious.

"Uh huh," she says eventually, opting not to ask for clarification.

The silence that settles between them then is neither awkward nor comfortable. It's a muffled, creeping sort of tension, like the hush of a courtroom in deliberation: full of sentences not yet determined, culpability not yet assigned, and the looming promise of a judgment to be made. Jon doesn't know if he's defendant, plaintiff, or some voiceless, unnamed victim. Maybe all three.

It isn't long before he hears footsteps above, followed by Georgie descending the ladder. Melanie climbs down after her, Georgie standing at the bottom to steady her.

One look at Melanie, and Jon can see the strain writ large in her demeanor. Her jaw is set and clenched, her spine is braced and rigid, and her entire body looks taut, like a coiled spring brimming with potential energy. She looks, in a word, volatile: a bundle of frayed nerves and brittle composure.

She turns and her sight locks onto Jon, pinning him in place like a moth to a board. She stands stock-still for what feels like an interminable moment, eyes wide and dazed-looking.

Then, in the span of a blink, she's directly in front of him, grabbing hold of his jumper in two fists and nearly knocking him off his feet.

“How do I quit, Jon?” Melanie asks, her voice wavering on the edge of breaking. “Tell me, Jon. Tell me – tell me right now or I’ll – I’ll–”

Meeting her eyes fully for the briefest of moments, Jon can see the raw desperation there. The first time around, she was all hatred and rage. There was fear there, too, but the all-consuming wrath of the Slaughter kept it at bay. This time, she’s been stripped of that armor.

Jon and Melanie have always had more in common than either of them like to admit. The insatiable curiosity, the stubborn willfulness, the habitual distrust, the visceral fear of being trapped and controlled. How they’ve both lived their lives on tenterhooks, constantly waiting on bated breath to be underestimated or condemned or dismissed. The preemptive antagonism in which they both cloak themselves to ward off and conceal that chronic feeling of insecurity that hangs over them. It’s really no wonder they rubbed each other the wrong way from the moment they first met.

But Melanie neither wants nor needs that sort of empathy right now, especially from him. It’s difficult enough to weather the sheer vulnerability of being seen and known and understood by another human. When an Avatar of the Eye Sees and Knows someone, it’s like being flayed alive.

And in that fleeting moment, when Jon looks into Melanie’s eyes, he sees – and Sees – himself. When he breaks line of sight, it’s for himself as much as it is for her.

Then Georgie is there, hand on Melanie’s shoulder, her tone of voice so very familiar: unyielding and soothing all at once.

“Hey, hey – he’s going to explain, yeah?”

“I – I–” Melanie makes a distraught, wounded noise.

“Trust me. Jon promised to explain, and he will. Right, Jon?”

"I'm here to provide a statement – and I will," Jon says, nodding *yes, yes, yes,* trying to pour as much sincerity into it as he can without actually reestablishing eye contact. *"And I promise it will be relevant by the end."*

Melanie bounces on the balls of her feet, eyes darting to and fro as she wages a war with herself. When she finally releases her grip on him, her fists immediately go up to ball in her hair instead.

"Please?" she says desperately, almost wails, as if Jon is withholding the information arbitrarily, just to see her beg. It stings. He was prepared for this – the bullet is gone, but the effects haven't completely disappeared just yet, and it was never just the Slaughter fueling Melanie's distrust and resentment – but it still feels like layering more bruises atop a sore spot. "*Please* just – just tell me, just–"

"He will, Melanie," Georgie says gently. "It might take some time – remember I said he's having trouble speaking? But he's–"

"Keeping secrets – like *Elias*–"

Jon visibly flinches. The shame creeps up on him immediately after. His head is bowed, but he Knows that the way she's looking at him right now is the same way she looks at Elias – at Jonah Magnus.

And what right does he have to take offense to that? It's not an unexpected comparison. It's not even an *unfair* comparison. Even if he was unwitting and unwilling, he was still Jonah's accomplice. Intent doesn't matter much when the consequences mean the end of the world, does it? Some actions are unforgivable, no matter the intention, no matter the remorse, and no matter the reparations made in the aftermath. The victims in the domains he passed through, on those rare occasions when they could actually perceive his presence, would see no distinction between him and their tormentors. Even his fellow monsters saw him as an apex predator – and they were right to.

So, yes, it's a logical comparison. He's the one who opened the door. He's the one with the blood on his hands. He's the one whose existence became synonymous with the Ceaseless Watcher. Jonah didn't have to lift a finger. Of the two of them, Jon is the one with the true destructive potential.

And just because it hasn't happened yet from this timeline's perspective, and just because Jon would readily sacrifice himself before letting it happen again, it doesn't make the wrong – or the guilt – go away. Even if he's the only one to remember it, all that suffering *happened*, and it happened because of him, and he has the power to make it happen again. The potential lurks there, not too far under the surface. It's a power no one should have, least of all the one who's actually used it.

"Can you sit down for me, Melanie?" Georgie is saying now. "Jon can't explain if we don't give him some space to talk, yeah?"

Melanie is shaking with pent-up energy, but she allows Georgie to guide her to a nearby chair. She collapses into it and hunches over, bringing her knuckles to her mouth and biting down with a frustrated whimper. One foot is tapping rapid-fire on the floor. The rest of her is drawn taut as a bowstring.

Georgie hooks another chair with her foot and drags it closer until it rests flush with Melanie's. As soon as she sits, Melanie presses up against her and Georgie puts an arm around her shoulders, drawing her close. She allows Georgie to gently guide her hand down and away from her mouth. Jon catches a brief glimpse of the indented tooth marks before Georgie coaxes her fist open to intertwine their fingers together.

"Right," Basira says, folding her arms and squaring her shoulders. "Talk, Jon. What's going on?"

For a moment, he just stands there. His right leg is trembling badly now, shot through with pain, so he puts all his weight onto his left. He lets his hands hang at his sides, fingers flexing and rubbing together nervously as he tries to order his thoughts.

Where to start? *How* to start?

He can feel three pairs of eyes boring into him now.

“Jon,” Basira says again.

Just start talking, Jon thinks, and he does.

“The Eye – Jonah – has marked me for something – his talk of a grand ritual – to try and wear the Watcher’s Crown.”

It comes out all in one breath. For an unbearably long stretch, they all just stare at him.

“Okay, you already need to slow down,” Georgie says, speaking softly so as not to jostle Melanie, whose head now rests on her shoulder. “*Who* is Jonah, and what's the Watcher’s Crown?”

“Jonah Magnus?” Basira asks, brow furrowed.

“I will call him ‘Elias,’ for that is how I’ve known him for most of our… acquaintance.”

“*Elias* is–”

“…originally known as Jonah Magnus, the founder of this Institute – also as James Wright, the previous head of this Institute.”

“What?” say all three women simultaneously, Melanie jerking upright now.

“It was so very close – the grand ritual – would open the door to a world of – the fear,” Jon says before any of them can interrupt further, stopping and starting like a scratched record as he splices together the scattered fragments of a single statement. *“We were to slice a hole in the world, and this – fear – would flow through the wound – that I had created.”*

He pauses, debating, before…

"I was complete," he adds. They should know what he became – what he *is*.

"Okay," Basira says, pacing now, "so Elias – Magnus – *whatever* – wants to try his turn at a ritual." She doesn't wait for Jon's affirmative before asking the first of many questions that no doubt just skyrocketed to the top of her list: "What's your part in it?"

"*...a battery, a ready source of constant terror."*

Jon pauses to scan his library.

"...to unlock and open the door."

"Right," Basira mutters, massaging her forehead: a familiar gesture that Jon has seen many times before, whenever she's trying to solve a problem or devise a strategy. "And how is it you know this?"

"...travel through time," Jon says simply, thankful to find those words in exactly that order only once in the Archive's stores. He isn't a poet; he's grateful for any opportunity to avoid speaking through symbolism.

"You have *got* to be kidding me." Melanie's hands curl into white-knuckled fists on her knees.

"I'm honestly not, I'm dead serious."

"Bullshit," Melanie and Georgie say together – Melanie scathingly, Georgie simply in bewildered, almost amused disbelief – just as Basira says, "How?"

"Statement of Anya Villette, regarding a cleaning job on Hill Top Road."

"The Anya Villette who never existed?" Basira asks.

"And then I noticed the crack. It seemed to split the floor right down the middle; it was–"

"–a scar in reality, that I believe has since been compounded by the interferences of other powers–"

"I get the idea," Basira cuts him off. Melanie, face buried in Georgie's shoulder again, mumbles something unintelligible.

"Well, I don't. Anyone care to enlighten me?" Georgie asks. At Melanie's muffled reply, she adds, with an indulgent little smile: "Melanie? You have an audience of one right now, and it's my jumper."

Melanie picks her head up and scowls at Georgie, who just laughs softly and smooths an unruly lock of hair down behind Melanie's ear. The gesture seems to have a potent effect on Melanie, whose shoulders relax for the first time since she made her appearance.

"Crack in the foundation of a spooky house," she says, sounding almost calm now. "May or may not lead to a parallel universe. Or something."

"Like… what, a wormhole?" Georgie asks.

Melanie shrugs. "Or something."

Jon doesn't realize he's grinning until Melanie glares at him and demands, *"What?"*

When Jon shakes his head – *Nothing, nothing!* – Georgie has to stifle a laugh.

“Back to the point,” Basira says.

“I had been offered the chance to return,” Jon says simply. He doesn’t exactly have the words to get caught up in semantics right now, even if he wanted to.

“Bullshit,” Melanie mutters again, but there’s little bite to it this time.

“Jon, this is…” There’s a soft hiss as Georgie sucks air in through her teeth. “It’s *really* hard to believe. You realize that, yeah?”

“But the only other explanation I could come up with was that Alex was lying, and I just needed to look at her to know that was even less likely.”

Jon keeps his eyes downcast, unsure of how Georgie will feel about hearing her statement used. A long, agonizing few seconds pass, Jon picking absently at the back of his hand, before she gives a nervous chuckle, and Jon can let out the breath he was holding.

“Okay,” she sighs. “Fair enough.”

“You believe him?” Melanie asks – but with genuine curiosity this time, hostile skepticism discarded for the time being.

“Well, I doubt he’s lying, at least. Jon can’t tell a lie to save his life. Especially not to me. So…” Georgie puffs her cheeks out and exhales heavily through her nose. “Either it’s true, or he’s mistaken, and… I think the former is more likely, given, you know – everything else.”

Unfortunately, Jon thinks wryly. If only he could chalk it up to a coma-induced fever dream, or even a complex but mundane delusion – something serious, but with an avenue of treatment. No, he actually *is* a red button one invocation away from initiating the apocalypse.

So to speak. He's *not* a poet, he tells himself again, but he's grown accustomed to speaking figuratively nonetheless. He isn't sure how to feel about that.

"Set all of that aside for now," Basira says, watching Jon carefully. "For the sake of moving the discussion forward, let's assume for the moment that I believe you. You're saying you have memories of the future?" Jon nods. "How far ahead?"

A full minute passes as Jon thumbs through statements. His mounting frustration must show, because Basira rephrases the question: "How close did Elias come to completing his ritual, where you came from?"

Now, reluctantly, Jon actually does make eye contact.

"That's why I'm here: because I didn't dream that. It happened."

Basira's expression is unreadable.

"I hope someday I'll forget what I saw when I opened that door, but I won't," he says quietly, looking down at his hands.

"You keep talking about a door–"

"...for the most part – treat it as though I'm talking in metaphors," he says with a resigned sigh.

"Right," Basira says under her breath. "So that makes you, what, a key?"

Jon shuts his eyes tight, forcing back the tears quickly gathering there.

“Jon.”

“There isn’t a day goes by I don’t curse myself,” he blurts out, the words cascading off his tongue one after the other in a flood. *“Soon I was giving my account as a full confession, and I could not keep from crying as I described what happened – I have never felt despair on the sheer scale I did at that moment–”*

“Jon,” Basira says forcefully, and he comes to an abrupt halt, like a jammed cassette tape. “Focus.”

She’s right, he thinks to himself. He ended the world and here he is making it about how it made *him* feel. *Perspective.*

“So,” Melanie says flatly. “You kick-started the apocalypse.”

She sounds more disbelieving than condemnatory – and Jon isn’t sure why *that’s* what does it, but one tear finally trickles loose. He hurriedly rubs it away with his sleeve.

“I tried to tell them what happened, they looked at me like I was making it all up.” A bitter, brittle laugh. *“At least, when they could stand to look at me at all.”*

“Jon.” He recoils at the sound of Georgie’s voice, calm and quiet as it is. “I’m going to ask you a question. It’s not an accusation, and it’s not a judgment. Okay?” *Not yet,* he thinks, but he nods. “Did you know what you were doing?” When he starts to shake his head *no,* she holds up a hand to stay him. “I’m not asking whether you knew exactly what would happen. I’m asking if you opened a door not knowing what was behind it – not *intending* harm, but taking the risk of hurting yourself, or – or someone else, just because–”

“...my curiosity was the fault that brought this on me?”

“Yeah.” Georgie says nothing else until he looks at her. “Did you find yourself in a situation where you could have walked away, and didn’t?”

It's a loaded question, all tangled up in the Web with all those nagging doubts about choice and fault. He had plenty of time during the apocalypse to inventory all the watershed moments in his life, scrutinizing each and every crossroads, weighing the evidence of free will against the illusion of choice, navigating his impossibly blurred boundary between personal accountability and victim blaming. At what points could he have walked away? Which point of no return had been his last, his most reprehensible?

"I'm not talking about in a *broad* sense," Georgie says, sensing his characteristic descent into rumination. "I'm talking about the specific event, ritual – whatever. Could you have walked away *in that moment?* Could you have just *not* opened the door?"

As much as Jon feels he's to blame for what happened… he *had* been trying to walk away, hadn't he? He and Martin both. Martin reminded him of that constantly – they were trying to get out, get away, get better. Jon *didn't* go looking for a grenade to jump on. Jonah came looking for *him.*

So he forces his way through a lifetime's accumulation of self-loathing, and he shakes his head *no.*

"Tried to escape it, but some things follow you no matter where you go."

How is it that that one sentence – confronting that longstanding loss of control, admitting the extent to which he's been subjugated – is so liberating yet so unbearably terrifying at the same time? Survivor's guilt and self-blame have only ever been a poison, and yet they were a comforting shield all the same, offering some semblance of agency, however tenuous. For so long, it had seemed like a fair tradeoff.

Georgie nods, apparently satisfied with his answer. "Okay."

"You believe him?" Melanie asks again.

“Yeah.” Georgie shrugs. “Jon blames himself for everything. If he’s willing to say he didn’t have a choice, I can believe that.”

Jon looks away, feeling uncomfortably seen. Georgie’s perceptiveness isn’t new, but it never gets any less mortifying to have it turned on him.

“So how did it happen then?” Basira asks coolly.

“Statement of Jonah Magnus regarding Jonathan Sims, the Archivist,” Jon says.

On reflex, he claps both hands over his mouth, suddenly flooded with the sense memories of Jonah sliding into his skin and wresting that last little bit of personhood away from him. Ever since that moment, Jon has had a knee-jerk association between the sound of his own voice and Jonah Magnus’ monologue. He wonders – doubts – whether that association will ever go away. Most of the time, it's in the background. Other times – like now – it’s like the ground falls out from underneath him and he's dropped right back into that memory. It’s unpredictable and largely inescapable. It’s difficult to avoid a trigger when that trigger is one’s own voice.

He’s learned to live with these moments when they overtake him. Or, rather, enough time has passed for him to become at least somewhat desensitized to it. Most days, he can swallow the nausea, dissociate from the panic, and succumb to a temporary state of numbness that should probably worry him more than it does. On bad days, he just doesn’t speak. The latter isn’t an option right now. So, he reaches for that familiar detachment.

But as he walks himself back from the edge and the seconds pass by, he realizes that they’re expecting him to recount the statement for them.

“…not – reading this statement out loud,” he manages to choke out.

“But he gave you a statement.” Basira says. It’s not a question. Jon makes a vague tilting motion with one hand and gives a half-nod: *Sort of?* Basira’s eyes narrow. “Or did you *compel* him to give you a statement?”

Jon shakes his head, making a diagonal slicing motion down through the air with one hand for emphasis: *No.*

"But he offered you a statement, and you accepted it?"

Growing frantic now, Jon shakes his head vehemently: *No, no, no, no, no–*

"Then *what?"*

"...chased me – deceit – follow me" – a skip backwards – *"read it – tried to read me back–"*

"Jon, slow down," Georgie says, sensing his onrush of panic – but he can't.

"I've been tricked into–"

"–unable to look away–"

"–there was now a tragedy to it that flowed from the words–"

"–nothing to do but fall into it – it felt right, like it was all I could do–"

The words come in a halting staccato, his mind speeding through statement after statement without him like a microfiche machine caught on fast-forward.

"–even as I did so, in the back of my mind I hated myself–"

"–I didn't stop, though – didn't know what to do, and my mind was swimming with – the collective horror of all the things that I had seen and felt–"

"–I struggled and fought, but it was far stronger than I was, and I could barely keep its jagged teeth from finding my throat–"

One hand finds his throat now. He can only distantly feel fingernails digging into his skin.

"–'alien' might be the best word for that presence – because what it made me feel was–"

"–something in the back of my mind, a frantic, scuttling terror – didn't do any good, though – no matter what I might feel about it – choice didn't even come into it–"

The Archive was born with a purpose, and it fulfilled its role eagerly, skillfully, instinctively. It felt *good*, it felt *right*, and even now, the instinct lingers. He misses it. He craves it. He wants it *back.* He–

" –the agony of being opened and remade – to have your who torn bloody from your what, and another crudely lashed into its place–"

There is a rushing noise in his ears, drowning everything out, and he stumbles–

"–I did what I did because it was what I was supposed to do – I'm not sure I really recognize who I became–"

Both hands go to his mouth again, clamping down in an attempt to stop the flood, but he's stuck on a loop, a broken record, a scratched disc, a–

"–it felt right, like it was all I could do – felt right – it was – right – all I could do – all I – do–"

He bites his tongue and he tastes blood.

"–the flowing tide that swarmed and scuttled as soon as the door opened – the door opened – the door opened–"

Since when does an Archive have blood? Since when does an Archive have a will? How can an Archive be more than it is, what it was made for, what it is destined for?

"–it felt right*–"*

Vertigo. A body listing sideways. A name being called.

Someone's hands are on someone's shoulders. Why does the Archive know that? It cannot Know anything here. That isn't *right;* this is not where it belongs–

"Jon!" Georgie's voice finally reaches him. Georgie's hands on his shoulders, steadying him. *His* blood rushing in his ears. *His* name being called. "Breathe."

He can't. He *can't.*

His bad leg finally buckles beneath him, but Georgie catches him and holds him upright.

"Catch your breath. There's no hurry."

Jon watches, unfocused, as Melanie brings her knuckles to her mouth again and chomps down, clearly biting back a strong dissent. Basira has no such qualms.

"Actually, there is," she says. Georgie glares at her. "Sorry, but we need to know the rest. Pull yourself together, Jon."

Jon shuts his eyes, tense and miserable with teeth clenched, hands curled into fists, fingernails biting into his palms. The Archive frequently used to lose control like that when Jon first started losing his voice – especially during his early attempts to suppress it – but it's been awhile since it's unraveled to such an extent.

“Sit down,” Georgie says emphatically, coaxing him down into a nearby empty chair. “Breathe.”

It takes a minute for him to fully convince himself that that’s even something he can *do,* and a few more to actually feel himself doing it. The edges of his mind finally brush against that hazy, detached calm, and he lets it take him. As his breathing begins to even out, he motions for Basira to continue.

“So Elias gave you a statement.” Jon gives a listless nod. “And you hearing it was part of the ritual?” Jon shakes his head. “Reading it, then? Out loud?” Another wordless nod. “And you did it.” Jon ducks his head and stares fixedly at his hands, clasped tightly in his lap. “*Why?* What did he do – corner you, project horrors into your mind, hold a gun to your head? What could he have possibly done to convince you to help him at the cost of the rest of the world?”

This would be much easier if he could give them Jonah’s statement in full, but he knows he wouldn’t be able to get through it. Even if he could, it feels like an unnecessary risk to recite it aloud, even the parts that don’t include the actual invocation.

“…not – choosing to continue reading this statement out loud,” he says, borrowing from Annabelle instead. *“But think about it, Jon. When’s the last time you were able to read a statement quietly to yourself without instinctively hitting record and speaking it aloud – by then you’re away; the roller coaster is dropping, and you’ve no real choice but to hold on and hope that – I don’t crash you.”*

“So it’s like compulsion?” Basira asks.

“Statement of Jonah Magnus,” he forces himself to say, *“regarding Jonathan Sims”* – a pained grimace – *“the Archivist.”*

He has to catch his breath again before continuing.

“…felt a… a presence within myself, inside my being. It was a feeling so utterly awful it’s hard to put it into words. Like a reflex reaction, your muscles moving without any instruction from your mind, but rather than a quick twitch of the leg, it’s a slow movement of your jaw,

your lips, forming your mouth into words – I could not deny then that there was something inside me."

He casts about for the next statement in his queue.

"And I read them. I read them all, and saw the doom of everyone who lives and breathes and hopes for life and happiness. They were pouring from the air around me and threaded through my mind, and no matter how I begged, they would not stop–"

Another pause; another fragment.

"–and then the sky blinks."

The others stare at him – whether processing the information or just waiting to see if there's more, Jon doesn't know.

"Okay," Basira says under her breath. Then, speaking up: "Could it happen again? If you were given the statement again – today, right now – would you be compelled to read it?"

"Yes. At least I think so."

"And would it have the same effect as it did before?"

Jon signals a *maybe,* but it's like someone else is moving his hands. He's floating somewhere outside himself and when he speaks, his voice no longer feels like a part of him. And that's fine. Good, even. It means that Jonah Magnus can't touch him.

"I was marked–"

"–I had a few close calls myself – that marked me so distinctively–"

Jon brandishes his burned hand, motions at the scar on his throat, points out the several worm scars visible on his exposed hands, neck, and face – all of it happening in slow motion, somewhere far away from him.

"Every moment moved us towards, towards the completion of the task and the culmination of our charge's terror–"

"–fourteen powers – each with an aim no more or less than manifestation. Apocalypse. Apotheosis."

"Fourteen." Basira murmurs soundlessly to herself for a few moments. When she speaks up again, it's with a suddenness that startles Jon halfway out of his daze. "Coming in contact with all of the Powers – is that a necessary condition? For the ritual to work?"

Basira may not have been a detective, but she could have been, Jon thinks. He makes an affirmative noise, adding: *"The marks won't come off, no matter how hard I scrub."*

"But you aren't marked by all of them. Not yet."

Jon frowns and gives an exaggerated shrug: *I'm not sure.*

"There was still a chance – of this strange ritual–"

"–having been there once already–"

"–lingered in my mind and–"

"–some thought – she was powerful enough already–"

"–I wonder, are those same words still there, squatting and biding their time, or have they already changed into some new unknown terror that I can neither know nor avoid, waiting to spring on me–"

" –I can feel it sometimes like it's still there–"

“This read-between-the-lines bullshit is like a literary analysis assignment,” Melanie grumbles.

“Meaningless strings of words, or weird little fragments of poetry – repeated over and over again, hundreds of times,” Jon agrees, gesticulating to emphasize that the frustration is *very* much shared. *“Vague, occasionally contradictory descriptions of what they actually wanted – broken or algorithmic English – had to scroll through almost word by word–”*

“Jon,” Basira says tersely.

“…the words we use are clumsy, vague things, always at the whim of interpretation and decay,” Jon concludes quickly, unable to resist getting in the last word.

Basira paces slowly back and forth. “So you might still be marked by all Fourteen.”

Jon gives an affirmative, but this point requires elaboration. He stares into the middle distance as he consults the Archive.

“I know your work brings you into contact with all sorts of fantastical terrors–”

“–it warps us and changes us and feeds on us – that’s the only part any of them beyond actually care about – they only care about what feels right, what freezes your belly with terror–”

“Jon, answer the question,” Basira says.

He *is* answering the question. He points at his mouth and hopes his meaning is clear: *Listen to what I’m saying.*

“…the fear never really went away. I’ve heard that being exposed to the source of your terror over and over again can help break its power over you, numb you to it, but in my experience–”

"–it is an enduring terror–"

"Yes, we get it, you're traumatized," Melanie hisses. "We're all traumatized."

Jon shakes his head, increasingly exasperated: *You're not getting it.*

He takes a breath and continues, haphazardly seizing on any snippets that come close to his intent:

"...he still got terrible nightmares–"

"–I remember feeling a surge of terror–"

" –can remember how it felt–"

"Can you stop being self-centered for *one minute?"* Melanie growls.

Jon makes an upset noise and looks to Georgie, willing her to understand.

"I remember it so clearly–"

" –I remember it like it was yesterday–"

" –no matter what happens to me, the memory of that – panicked terror will stay with me–"

He traces an *X* mark on his forehead with one finger, not breaking eye contact.

"Oh," Georgie exhales, and Jon watches her expectantly. "Psychological scars. As long as you remember the experience – the trauma – it still counts as a – a 'mark?'"

Jon nods vigorously.

“Oh,” Basira echoes. “That figures,” she says with a huff. “The fear itself is the scar, then. The feeling is all that matters to them.”

It’s not a question, but Jon confirms it anyway, finally stumbling across a suitable statement:

“…the damage wasn’t something they could see – I knew they went further, went deeper than would show on my skin – just went on and on and on, far beyond me.”

That should be clear enough. He wishes he could have gone with that to–

“You should have gone with that to begin with,” Melanie mutters.

“…had to scroll through almost word by word,” Jon snaps back. He *could* put the conversation on hold every time he has to speak, spend long stretches of time consulting the Archive to find the closest approximation to his meaning, but he doesn’t have the patience for that, and neither does anyone else. He’s long since taken to grabbing whatever is nearest to the top of the pile, so to speak.

Melanie rolls her eyes. She doesn’t seem particularly angry with him, though, just tired and irritable in general – and they both always have had this effect on one another. It’s almost comforting, to slide so easily into that old routine.

As the seconds tick by and it becomes clear to Jon that the others are speechless, he breaks the silence.

“But you know how – sometimes you quit because you want to, and sometimes you quit because you’ve got to?”

That piques Melanie’s interest.

"…a way out," he continues, *"a way to escape."*

Everyone's eyes are on him again.

"…that James could watch us from any eye, even an illustration. What did you *do? How did* you *sever that link?"*

He watches them back, waiting for the penny to drop.

"…to cause me to blind myself, for I shall not deny I did so willingly–"

He closes his eyes, rests his thumbs over the lids, and presses gently.

"Fuck off," Georgie whispers, and Jon only barely keeps from laughing, remembering Martin's identical reaction.

"So we just have to blind ourselves?" Melanie asks evenly. Georgie shoots her a worried look.

"Just so long as they're useless," Jon confirms.

Melanie is staring off into space, cool and collected, as if the solution Jon just presented is as simple and painless as flipping a switch. He supposes it *is* simple, in its own way. Painless, not so much.

"Is that the only way?" Basira asks.

Jon shakes his head *no. "I was left with pretty much two options."*

“Okay, and what’s the other?” Georgie asks, still watching Melanie’s blasé reaction with apprehension.

“One sacrifice,” Jon says. *“Just one.”*

“And?” Basira presses. “What is it?”

Jon swallows hard. He’s realizing now that he hates accessing statements he collected after the world ended, but there’s nothing for it.

“Angus Stacey had, in the long tradition of Institute Archivists – died,” he begins, pausing to rewind and reorder the statement. *“And – when Angus Stacey died – she had the chance to walk away.”*

A drawn, heavy silence in which Jon feels… nothing. Maybe the dissociative haze didn't entirely clear after all. Or maybe he’s just tired from this prolonged, slapdash communion with the Archive.

“…there are plenty whose lives might well have been easier with my death,” he continues, just in case they need further clarification.

Georgie goes rigid. “Jon–”

“Are you even able to die at this point?” Basira interrupts.

“I had no guarantee it was even possible for me to die,” Jon admits.

Then:*“…it was likely he was no longer human enough for me to remove him without the aid of – a Hunter.”*

Basira gives a contemplative hum. “Without you, Elias can’t initiate his ritual,” she points out. It’s not a question.

Jon nods. But it isn't that simple.

“...just a small delay–”

“–even if it was only brief or might compromise some of the work–”

“–he would return eventually, when he was finished with–”

“–lying low, recovering, before returning–”

“–look into appointing a successor–”

“–began what would eventually become a campaign of – terror–”

“–eventually the door opened–”

He cuts himself off there and gasps, winded from stitching together so many disparate soundbites back-to-back.

“But he would be delayed until he managed to prepare another Archivist,” Basira says.

“I’ll not deny it,” Jon answers, breathless.

“You can’t be serious,” Georgie says, looking between them. “This – you can’t actually be considering this.”

“We need to explore all our options,” Basira says. “Even the last resorts.”

“It isn’t an option at all,” Georgie says heatedly, then looks at Jon. “I thought you wanted to get *better.* I thought you were done with reckless self-sacrifice–”

"You may rest assured I'm no suicide," Jon says hurriedly, rousing himself at the prospect of losing Georgie again.

But…

"The choice – was not entirely mine, as my circumstances had driven me into a very particular situation."

His laugh is jarring, closer to a bark.

"…too much of a health and safety hazard–"

"That isn't funny, Jon," Georgie snaps. Jon puts his hands up, placating: *Sorry, sorry.*

"He has a point, though," Melanie says, mirroring Jon's pacifying gesture when Georgie turns the glower on her. "I'm not saying we should kill him. I'm just saying that, *if* there's no other option, and we have to choose between one person and many people–"

"–all the world, utterly destroyed," Jon supplies. It comes out flatter than he had intended.

"Then we might need to make a difficult choice," Basira summarizes.

"Look," Georgie says, all of her attention focused on Jon, ignoring the other two now. "I understand why you feel this way, but no." She doubles down when Jon opens his mouth to speak. "*No,* Jon. Because given your track record, I don't trust you to treat it as a last resort. If we – if *I* give you permission to think like this, you'll let it become a reassurance. You won't think twice before courting death if you can do it guilt-free. So, no. You don't have my approval. You promised me you were going to try, and – Jon, look at me," she says as Jon lets his gaze drift away. She waits until he meets her eyes before she continues. "If you know you

have this contingency plan waiting in your back pocket, it *will* keep you from finding alternate solutions. I *know* you."

"...didn't want to die, the idea of death terrified him–"

"Good," Georgie says curtly, though she doesn't look entirely convinced. "Take the option off the table, then."

Jon worries his lower lip between his teeth. The thing is, he *doesn't* want to die.

Admittedly, he's lapsed into that mindset in the past. During this part of his timeline the first time around, he could likely have been categorized as passively suicidal, much as he wants to dismiss it. At some point, it had taken up permanent residence in the back of his mind. It ebbed and flowed, but even in its quietest moments, it was there: a constant, comforting weight. Looking back, he realizes that finding comfort in the idea of dying – to the point of treating it like an anchor, in retrospect – should have been a cause for concern.

After he lost Martin during the apocalypse, that ever-present ideation rushed to the forefront of his mind, loud and active and erratic. There was a stretch of time where, if he hadn't been physically incapable of dying, he would have gone through with it. But by then, even starving himself wasn't a viable option. There was no tuning out the endless flow of statements filtering through him every moment.

That was back when his only course of action was to hurt – himself, other monsters, it made no difference. It never helped anyone, never saved any of the victims, never fixed anything. Using that power only made Jon feel more and more estranged from the person he wished he could be, closer and closer to the entity Jonah Magnus groomed him to be, and more and more beholden to the Ceaseless Watcher.

He came so close to losing himself. Not dying, not ceasing to exist, not even losing consciousness, just – being lost in the noise, unable to rest and unable to act. Like the Buried, except this time the coffin would be his own mind – and this time he wouldn't be able to escape.

But things have changed. Right here, right now, he actually has a chance to help. Even just talking to his victims in his nightmares – it's the bare minimum, but it's so much more than he's been able to do in ages.

Even if he *did* want to die, he still has things he has to do. He has to save Daisy. He has to save Martin. He has to stop Jonah Magnus – hopefully permanently. Now that Jon has experienced the man's nightmare kingdom firsthand, simply postponing it indefinitely seems unconscionable.

And even after he does those things… assuming Martin can still find it in himself to love Jon in this new timeline, how could Jon abandon him? It was reason enough to stay alive during the apocalypse. It certainly has to be reason enough to stay alive now, when there's actually a chance of making things better.

His eyes drift to the fifth chair in the room, unclaimed. The sight is enough to chase away the remnants of that earlier numbness that had been stubbornly clinging to him.

"I had to live. I couldn't die, not then."

Basira is watching him, pensive, motionless, silent. It's unbearable. Reluctantly, he calls up the testament she recorded before they all left to stop the Unknowing.

"My options… they've gotten a lot narrower," he quotes. *"If you don't like something, you accept it and you adapt–"*

"That's enough," Basira says sharply.

"–or you fight and you change it."

The ensuing quiet is charged. Jon forces himself to look up and into her eyes, at the impulses warring there. He cannot Know what she's feeling, not here in the tunnels, but he does know her – both through past instances of Knowing and through the gentler, more conscious, more

human experience of learning a person. He wishes he had more skill with the latter and less experience with the former, but either way, between the two, he thinks he can make some educated guesses: she wants to scream at him – *he has no right to those words;* she wants to break down – *she misses her father, she misses Daisy;* she wants to believe him – *because she can't do this alone anymore, she can't, and having no one to trust is terrifying and exhausting* – and Jon knows what *that's* like, doesn't he?

Jon takes a breath, steels himself, and tells her: *"I'm going to fight, and change it."*

She holds his gaze, intense and stony, for a moment longer – and then her shoulders sag and she exhales through her nose, sounding thoroughly rundown.

"Stop looking at me like that, Jon," she says tiredly, sinking down into the nearest chair. "I don't want to kill you. I'm not *planning* on killing you. I'm just trying to account for all the variables. It's nothing personal. I can't *afford* for it to be personal. Not anymore. I've had to be practical. You haven't been here–"

"I asked her – I'd like to help."

"That's fine to say, but you can't expect much in the way of trust. By your own admission, you're not human anymore." She pauses, giving him an opening to contradict her. He doesn't. "And even if you were, you just – you aren't exactly known for coming up with workable strategies. Hell, if anything you attract trouble, intentional or no."

Jon chuckles at that. It's not an unfair observation. For a fraction of a second, the corner of Basira's mouth quirks up in a grin, and Jon is reminded of their dry banter from back when they first met. Other than Georgie, Basira was the only one to consistently pick up on his wry sense of humor.

"Do you have a plan?" Georgie asks. "Bad or otherwise?"

Jon holds one hand palm up and mimics writing on it, looking at Basira's bag. When Basira hands him the notepad and pen, he flips to an empty page and scribbles a few rudimentary drawings: a stylized eye, a flower, and a teacup. The representations are just barely oblique

enough to pass through the Archive's filter. The flower in particular is *almost* too on-the-nose, and it brings on a momentary tremor in his hand, but he prevails in the end. The final result is shaky, but identifiable enough.

He'll almost certainly have a migraine later, but he's already resigned himself to that, given how much he's been taxing himself accessing the Archive. There's a reason he started avoiding long conversations. (Not that he had much incentive to push his limits once Martin was lost to him. Who was he going socialize with, his own shadow? His insufferable entourage of eyes? *Helen?*)

He holds up the notepad for the others to see.

"I thought if I could deal with him" – Jon jabs his pen at the eye – *"and save a few lives"* – he taps the flower and teacup once each – *"I might as well."*

Melanie squints at the drawings. "Obviously the eye is Elias, but–"

"The teacup–"

"Oh, is *that* what that is?" Melanie asks, interrupting Georgie and giving Jon a goading look. He just rolls his eyes. He knows he's no artist, and it doesn't bother him in the least.

"–is Martin," Georgie continues, hushing Melanie with a stern glance that doesn't *quite* conceal her amusement. "Jon used to go on and on about how good his tea was. *And* he's been asking after him every time I sleep. Bit of a one-track mind, really."

"I need them to be safe," Jon says, only a little defensively. *"I need* him *to be okay."*

It feels both peculiar and yet fitting to speak through Martin's testament from so long ago. Well, only months earlier from the others' perspective, but – it's not important. Melanie snorts, and Basira just shakes her head.

“What about the flower?” Georgie redirects, gesturing at the notepad.

“…Daisy’s coming,” Jon says.

Throughout the conversation, a tiny sliver of warmth had started to peek through Basira’s composure. Instantaneously, it bleeds away.

“Daisy is dead.”

“…she’s solid,” Jon insists, parroting Basira’s testament again. *“She’s a… a fixed point, and–”*

“Don’t,” Basira says, a distinct note of warning in her tone.

“–she’s there, I know exactly where–”

“*Shut up*, Jon.”

He can’t, but as a compromise, he abandons Basira’s statement and forages for another.

“…the casket, a hungry thing of the earth, a – tomb that will not let you die because it is too much what it is for death to find you there – buried alive.”

Basira’s demeanor shifts again, some of the hostility ebbing away. “What are you talking about?”

"When that Hunter killed him – it was there." Jon suppresses a grimace of pain; the exertion of tapping into the Archive is really starting to catch up with him now. *"It was waiting – fed her to it – she doesn't get to die – gets to live – entombed forever – tied to the casket – can climb in and join her."*

"Is this another metaphor" – Jon shakes his head *no* – "or a *literal* casket?"

"It was almost a month before–"

"–a delivery addressed to me – a coffin."

Basira digs her phone out of her pocket, pulls up the calendar app, and holds it up to Jon.

"When?"

He navigates to March and taps on the third day of the month.

"And it'll be delivered here?"

Jon nods. Basira is quiet for a long moment.

"And Daisy is in there."

"...real and alive – I swear to you."

"Because it won't let her die," Basira says, a hard edge to her tone. "Buried alive, and unable to die – how is *tortured for eternity* better than just *dead,* Jon?"

"...the last time I went there–"

"–to get her out–"

"–it almost destroyed me. But it didn't – in the end – I succeeded – we had succeeded."

"You can bring her back?" Basira's guard drops even further, revealing just a glimpse of cautious hope.

"I said yes, we were very close."

"No offense, but I wouldn't call us 'close,' Jon–"

Jon shakes his head, touches the pen tip to the flower drawing and then points at himself.

"You and *Daisy?"*

"...the closest thing this world had to real monsters–"

"–despite this – or maybe because of it – we became friends–"

"–there was a camaraderie that came from being the only two people in that weird place, and it didn't take long for us to become good friends."

Georgie frowns. "Daisy, is she the one who–"

"Slit his throat?" Melanie gives Jon a pointed, almost mischievous look and then flashes a grin at Georgie, like a sibling tattling to a parent. "Yep."

Jon stares daggers at Melanie, who has the gall to feign innocence.

"Jon," Georgie groans, dragging one hand down her face.

"I wanted to act, to help, to do something," Jon protests.

"Are you *sure* you'll be able to make your way back?" Georgie asks, staring him down. Jon gives an affirmative. "And this isn't a death wish, or – or some roundabout suicide attempt?"

"I somehow managed to live through one horror movie."

Georgie lets out a breathless laugh and shakes her head. Then, she sighs and adopts a serious air again.

"Look at me." Jon does. "You're an adult, I won't stop you from making your own decisions. But I get to make my own choices too, and a choice isn't a choice when it's based on lies and omission. So tell me the truth: is this more of the same, or can you *sincerely* say that you know what you're doing?"

"If you had asked me before, I would have told you that there was no difference, but I know better now."

"Do you promise?"

He nods, but holds up one finger – *wait* – as he roots around for the best way to make the promise meaningful. It takes some time and no small amount of effort, but he needs to be precise.

"...I am alive, and I desperately wish to keep it that way."

He looks into her eyes as he says the words, hoping she can hear the unspoken sentiment: *I meant what I said. I do want to live. And even when I don't, I want to* want to *live.*

"We were simply seeking a better life."

He infuses it with every ounce of sincerity he can muster: *I meant what I said. I want to get better. I don't know what that looks like, but I want to find out.*

"This, I knew, was to be my chance."

The first time, Georgie didn't see this as a second chance – and neither did Jon. But this time: *I meant what I said. I do think this is a second chance, and I want to take it.*

"I didn't see any other option than to try."

It's the only thing that got him through the journey to the Panopticon, through losing Martin, through the Archive's death grip on his mind: *I meant what I said. I want to try. I've been trying. I am trying. I will keep trying.*

Georgie continues to hold his gaze, and Jon forces himself not to look away. Eventually, she nods.

"Alright then." He smiles – cautious, relieved – and this time, when she smiles back, it actually does reach her eyes. "I'll hold you to that, Jon."

Thank you, he thinks. He still doesn't believe he deserves her support, but she's owed his gratitude all the same, and he truly does want to *earn* the trust she's placing in him. *Thank you, thank you, thank you.*

"So," Georgie sighs, smile fading into a frown. "Save Daisy, save Martin, deal with your evil monster boss."

"And get as far away from this place as possible," Melanie says.

“And into therapy,” Georgie adds. There isn’t even the hint of a joke in it, and no one refutes her. “For anyone who wants it, anyway.”

“I wouldn’t mind burning this place to the ground, either,” Melanie says. There’s a ghost of a joke this time, but it falls flat. Once again, though, no one raises any objections.

Basira takes a deep breath and composes herself.

“Right,” she says, businesslike, sitting up straight and turning her attention back to Jon. “Where do we begin?”

Chapter End Notes

Jonathan Sims: Just write some prose and stop wasting everyone's time.
The Archive: no,,, oblique metaphors and blackout poetry ONLY 👁️

_____

- Cross-posted to tumblr here.

- Again, thank you for bearing with me for how lengthy and exposition/dialogue-heavy this chapter ended up being!! I know it ran long, but I didn't see a good place to break the chapter up - it felt like separating this scene into two parts would've broken the flow too much.

- Also, LOTS of citations in this one, obviously. I'm going to list them anyway, but honestly, if you want to know where a certain snippet came from, feel free to just ask. I don't expect anyone to count lines just to figure out what episode is being referenced. (I'm going to put forward slashes to indicate those statements that are clustered together. Hopefully it'll make it a bit easier to track.)

- SO, [deep breath] Jon's dialogue for Chapter 8 comes from the statements in the following episodes, in order: MAG 057; 125; 029; 138; 159; 161; 143; 143 (again); 135; 027; 088; 148; 114; 114/139; 011; 094; 063; 069; 124; 020; 067; 060; 141; 160; 147; 091; 072/009/007/004; 066/020/010; 106/059; 101; 059; 004; 102; 004; 147; 160; 020; 144; 138; 107; 048/007; 128/138; 126; 062/087/007/139/070/049; 123; 065; 092/145; 086/029; 044/012/049; 137/009/014; 091; 123; 148; 154; 154 (again); 098; 154; 129; 155; 167; 159; 057; 113; 124/057/009/143/011/017/005; 152; 152 (again); 097; 028; 023; 065; 155; 117; 117 (again); 155; 006; 113; 117 (x4); 128; 128 (again); 045/002;

016; 036/109/135; 048; 052/136/090; 124; 069; 098; 133; 058; 140; AAAAND FINALLY: 010.

- Sorry for how convoluted that is, lmao. I was so tempted to just do footnote citations, but the Look of that would've messed with the flow of the story I felt - it's already fragmented and jarring enough (by design, considering that's literally how Jon is talking and what his internal thoughts feel like to him, but I understand it can be choppy to read). Seriously though, again, if you want to know where a particular line of dialogue comes from, please feel free to ask.

Resolve

Chapter Summary

In which the archival staff determine their next steps, and an adversary plots his countermoves.

Chapter Notes

CWs for Chapter 9: victim blaming (some internalized); mentions of starving oneself (in a supernatural sense – i.e. not taking statements – but I thought I'd mention it just in case); a few instances of casual misgendering (not malicious; just the usual Archive-speak limitations); swearing; Jon-typical anxiety & self-loathing; Jonah Magnus-typical Being a Machiavellian Creep*. Also, some (canon- and fic-typical) JonMartin angst. (We will eventually get to the Comfort part of the hurt/comfort. I just have to drag these two through some Hurt first. As Jonny Sims intended, I GUESS.)

*With regard to Jonah Magnus: his section involves some extensive inner monologue re: the manipulation of a victim & several classic abuser tactics – e.g. choosing a susceptible target, isolating them from support systems, finding ways to make them dependent/trapped, objectifying them, breaking down their self-esteem, etc. It's all canon-typical stuff, but still: read with care. If you need to skip that section, all you really need to know is that Jonah is being his usual arrogant bastard self, waxing poetic about how he's grooming Jon to be the Archive, pondering some of the recent changes in Jon's abilities/behavior, and engaging in some characteristic voyeurism.

UPDATE: audiobon on Tumblr made some *gorgeous* art based on the final scene in this chapter, please go check it out here!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jon is unsurprised when such a straightforward question – *"Where do we begin?"* – quickly devolves into a second wave of interrogation.

Georgie wants to know what they should look out for in the coming weeks and what preparations they can start making now. He's come to expect (and appreciate) that sort of one-step-at-a-time approach from her, but he's stunned to see her so actively engaged. He had assumed that even if she did choose to stay in his life, it would be from a safe distance. On the one hand, her support is heartening; on the other, he would rather not involve anyone else

in this part of his life. But Georgie is as sensible as she is resolute – she isn't one to recklessly endanger herself, and she knows when to cut her losses. And, of course, she isn't just doing this for Jon. As long as Melanie is trapped here, Georgie is embroiled, too.

Melanie, for her part, has fallen eerily quiet, one hand held in Georgie's and the other curled into a fist on her knee, white-knuckled and trembling almost imperceptibly. She wears a determined scowl, and Jon doesn't have to Know to have an idea of what equations she's running in her mind and what questions she's queuing up for him to answer later.

Meanwhile, Basira wants explicit details about the Coffin – its provenance, the details of its impending arrival, a play-by-play of what happened the last time Jon went in, Daisy's condition. Jon doubts he'll be able to answer as comprehensively or precisely as she wants, but he can try.

For several minutes, he indulges a barrage of questions – answering mostly with simple *yes* and *no* gestures – but his vision is starting to grow pixelated, interspersed with the occasional flash or sparkle, and he can feel the pressure growing in his temples. Surefire precursors of a migraine, in his experience – and he still has one more pressing matter to attend to before it renders him useless.

"I want to focus on the casket for now," Basira is saying.

"Makes sense if its delivery is only a few weeks away, as long as – Jon, is there anything else coming up before then that we need to–" Georgie's expression shifts from focused to concerned in an instant when she catches a glimpse of him. "Are you okay? You look–"

"Before I continue – this is – very, very important for you to know."

"What is it, Jon?"

"…that Eye of yours," he begins slowly, *"warps us and changes us and feeds on us–"*

"–part of being the Archivist – to harvest the fears of the other entities, dragging out the suffering of those who come to give statements and claiming their terror."

He struggles for a few moments before settling on, *"I don't want to, but it's in my nature now, and you can't fight what you are. Or even what you aren't."*

"That's not exactly a revelation," Basira says. "We already know that you feed on the statements."

"There's – more to say about that." Jon hesitates. It isn't that he doesn't have the words to explain. It's that he's *afraid*.

"Go on," Basira says, watching him suspiciously now.

Jon closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and forces the words out.

"...feverishly hunting for–"

"–someone in person."

"Live statements." Basira has that hard edge to her voice again, like she's assessing a threat. Which is… exactly what she's doing, Jon supposes.

"Like the nurse at the hospital?" Georgie asks.

"What nurse?" Melanie finally speaks up, eyes flitting between Georgie and Jon.

"Apparently Jon can sense potential statement givers on sight now," Basira replies, not taking her eyes off of Jon.

"What did he do?"

'He' is sitting right here, Jon thinks tiredly.

"He didn't do anything," Georgie says, calmly but with a faint hint of admonishment and an apologetic glance in Jon's direction. His heart glitches in his chest a little at how immediately she comes to his defense. "He noticed what was happening, stopped himself, and asked me to blindfold him until we got somewhere safe."

Jon keeps his eyes downcast. He categorically does *not* deserve this benefit of the doubt – and she'll realize that momentarily, as soon as he tells them about all the times that he *didn't* stop himself.

"'Safe,'" Melanie scoffs. "The Archives?"

Safe, Jon thinks to himself with exactly the same bitter incredulity. Yet, it's not entirely inaccurate. This *is* the safest place for him right now – in terms of both avoiding the other Powers *and* protecting the rest of the world from him.

"You know what I meant," Georgie says, but there's no irritation in her tone.

"So, you really aren't human anymore," Melanie says blandly, watching Jon. He doesn't object.

"It woke something in me. Something truly awful. And I hurt so very many people."

"You went hunting for victims," Basira says, comprehending. "How many?"

Jon holds up five fingers.

"Jesus," Melanie mutters. Georgie's expression is unreadable – and somehow, that's worse than any of the possible negative reactions that Jon had anticipated.

"When?" Basira asks. "Before the Unknowing, or in your future?"

"…that bit was some ways in the future."

"Hm." Basira's eyes are fixed on him, impassive and calculating.

"There were very few points where I'd say that I was entirely sober and even fewer where I acted like it," Jon continues quietly. *"I realized too late that I… I was thoroughly lost."*

"Were you doing it voluntarily?" Basira asks, getting right to the crux of the matter. Jon can feel himself burning under the weight of her scrutiny – now more accusing than assessing, and deservedly so. "Or were you 'compelled' to do that, too?"

Jon knew that question was coming, and he dreaded it all the same. How much time has he spent obsessing over it? How many roadside breakdowns and late-night soliloquies and circuitous debates about the nature of free will does he have under his belt by now? Far too many to summarize in a few words – certainly considering his current limitations.

He fishes around for a statement that might at least convey the complexity of the question.

"My memories of a lot – are, well, not exactly foggy, but feel almost like I'm watching someone else's memories. I remember that it sometimes felt like I'd do things without actually deciding to do them. Like it was just a muscle memory moving me, or a string gently guiding me. I did what I did because it was what I was supposed to do – I'm not sure I really recognize who I became."

It really *was* like a trance, at least in the beginning. The first time, he had gravitated towards his victim without even realizing what was happening. The second time was just after he was stabbed by Melanie and found himself wandering the streets in a near-fugue. He had locked

eyes with a passerby and the need overtook him. Despite the haze, he could recognize it as the same impulse that had washed over him when he encountered his first victim. Looking back, although he wasn't entirely lucid, he thinks he might have been able to stop himself if he had tried harder. When he found his next couple of victims, he had been actively hunting – on autopilot, certainly, but not entirely unaware either. Although he was fully enthralled during the statement itself, he – the human part of him, at least – knew that it was wrong both before and after the deed.

And Floyd… well, there's no denying that *that* was premeditated. Jon knew *exactly* what he was doing when he chose that ship. He rationalized it by telling himself it was in line with Gertrude's trademark utilitarianism – which is what Basira wanted from him, what *Tim* had wanted from him. But it was never just that. It wasn't even *primarily* that. The simple truth is that Jon was hungry, and he wanted it as much as he needed it, and it felt good. Everyone already knew he was a monster – there was no point in pretending otherwise – and he was becoming desensitized to that conclusion himself. Helen had been right: no amount of hand-wringing or guilt would stop him from feeding the Beholding and walking the path Jonah Magnus set before him.

"I know that my will and my actions were my own, but even at the time I knew that – I was – so very wrong but… it didn't feel like at the time I could have made any other choice."

Because it really *didn't* feel like it, did it? But he *did* have a choice, in retrospect. He changed his behavior, after all – too late, and he still has no idea whether resisting indefinitely would have killed him, but he stopped. It doesn't make him any less accountable, and it doesn't alleviate the guilt, but once he knew he could resist, he *did*. Meaning he probably had the choice all along.

Without Martin's intervention, he would have continued on that path: being the monster he and everyone else expected him to be, just because it didn't *feel* like there was any other choice. It felt *right;* it seemed unnatural and fruitless to fight it; it was easier to give in and lean into it, and he figured he may as well use that power to make himself useful.

"Were you in control of yourself or not, Jon?" Basira asks again. "Clarity, please."

Jon bites back an annoyed huff. What he wouldn't give for some *clarity*.

"…told me that her will was still her own but that it – felt like something was in her head, changing what she saw and felt and thought."

That's probably the most accurate he can get, given his limited speech options: it was a bit of both. He *was* influenced – by the Eye at the very least, and possibly by the Web – but he also had some measure of self-control. He just didn't exercise it until he had already victimized five people, and only then because someone else intervened. Jonathan Sims would never have done those things, but the Archivist was another matter entirely. In the end, though, they were and are the same person. Even if they weren't, the consequences would still be the same.

"Is it like an addiction?" Georgie finally speaks up. Jon nearly jumps at the sound of her voice, and he has to take a minute to hunt for an appropriate statement.

"It's funny how fear can just become as routine as hunger – at a certain point I just accepted it."

"That… doesn't answer my question," Georgie says, not unkindly. "Is it an addiction, or – or sustenance? Do you need it to survive?"

Define 'survive,' he wants to say. Starving himself *hurts* in a way that goes far deeper than mere physical pain, but he doesn't know whether it will actually kill him – or, if so, how long that would take. It doesn't matter, though. This time, he isn't going to hunt, no matter how bad it gets.

"I resolved to find out."

All three of them look like they're about to start speaking at once, and he holds up a finger: *Wait.* He needs to get all of this out while he still can.

"Reduced once again to feeding on the unsuspecting and confused. That is who I am–"

"–much as it may pain me to feed the sick voyeur that lurks in this place–"

"–something I was desperate to avoid doing."

He stares at his hands, clenching and unclenching on his knees. Miserable though it feels, he pulls up Jane Prentiss' statement – another Avatar who had seemed so *human* before she was hollowed out by the thing that called to her.

"You must understand – I need it, but I am afraid. It isn't right and I need help."

"So, what?" Georgie frowns. "We keep you under constant supervision?"

Jon nods, resolute. Judging by Georgie's expression, she had meant it as a hyperbole, but it's exactly what Jon had in mind.

"...to keep an eye on the monsters–"

"–they were keeping me under observation–"

"–under constant scrutiny and given no chance to harm anyone–"

"–which would keep – away from people."

"We can't just keep you under lock and key–"

"No, we can," Basira says, uncompromising. Her eyes haven't left him this entire time. He expected nothing less than decisiveness from her in this matter, and he's glad of it. He can only hope she can read his sincerity when he looks back at her and nods in agreement.

"...for the safety of society at large–"

"–I don't go home anymore. I'm afraid of what might happen–"

"–knew it was only a matter of time before he hurt–"

"–I am dangerous–"

"–and here I have remained."

"So you're going to just… stay cooped up down here?" Georgie asks.

"…sleep in the – cot I keep in my office," Jon replies with a shrug.

"Well," Melanie says, "it's not like he'd be the only one. Basira and I have been living here for months. Barely ever leave."

"Are you *sure* this is necessary, Jon?" Georgie asks again. "You aren't just – punishing yourself for things you didn't even do yet?"

"Still, at the end of the day, I did it," Jon says vehemently.

When she opens her mouth, he signals *wait* again, taking a moment to queue up the statements he needs.

"…I know – I remember – never forgive myself–"

"–acknowledged that it had happened–"

"–very much accountable for–"

"–all the horrible things I've done–"

"–I remember a life that was – shouting, recriminations – I was abandoned–"

"–so much silence and distrust – passed between us–"

"–neither could I say I have not earned it–"

"–trust me when I say he had it coming–"

"–deserve its ghoulish reputation–"

"–deserves the things that come after–"

"–should have fought harder against the temptation–"

Lightheadedness overtakes him for a moment; Jon has to pause and ride it out before he can dive back in.

"…I'm well aware that – I have – responsibility to try and prevent–"

"–real harm in him going out into the world–"

"–hoping against hope that this time–"

"–this time I was going to–"

"–resist – to – avoid being drawn in, like a moth to the flame."

He allows himself a brief pause, just long enough for one deep breath and a shaky exhale.

"I don't want you to think I'm some selfish monster grinding people up just to extend my own ghoulish life," he concludes, scratching absently at the back of his burned hand.

Georgie says nothing for a long moment, and then she sighs. "If you're sure."

"…insisted that this was what he wanted," Jon assures her.

Then: *"I didn't want to go back."*

He falters before also adding, in a near-murmur: *"It wears you down to be someone whom nobody wants to see."*

He knows it makes him seem self-centered, talking about his own feelings when the real victims are the people he hurt, but… well, there's no denying that alienation has only ever made it more difficult for him to cling to what little remains of his humanity. If possible, he would like to avoid becoming a pariah this time around – for his own selfish need to belong,

yes, but also because isolation has only ever made him more dangerous. He needs that human connection to remind him of who he is – who he wants to be.

"Alright," Georgie concedes, though she still sounds dubious. "Well… I managed to save some things from your flat before you lost it. I can bring them in, if you'd like."

Jon nods distractedly, only half-listening. He feels himself flagging now, and there's one more thing he has to get in before he crashes.

"On the subject of Elias – has certain… abilities of clairvoyance, which allow him to perceive out of any eye, real or symbolic, so be wary. Play ignorant as long as you can while you expand your own research – the longer he is ignorant of how much you know, the better."

"All of this is tunnels-only information," Georgie translates.

Jon nods.

"…ensure that they always under- or overestimate you. Never reveal your true abilities or plans."

It makes his skin crawl, adopting Annabelle's mindset, but it's the only way he can think to deal with someone like Jonah Magnus. And he can't really bring himself to care overmuch at the moment. Lethargy is dropping over him like a lead blanket.

"Jon?" Georgie's voice sounds like it's coming from three rooms over.

"I just needed a break, some time to get my head right," Jon mumbles through several layers of exhaustion, his tongue feeling thick and heavy and out of place in his mouth.

"Later," Basira says. "We're not done yet."

To Jon's credit, he does try. But at some point, he tries to draw on the Archive and hits a wall of static. Georgie seems to pick up on it before anyone else. When Jon struggles to answer a simple yes-or-no question for a solid two minutes, she jumps in to rescue him.

"I think that's enough for today," she says. For a moment, Basira looks like she wants to argue, but Georgie cuts her off. "Jon's an insufferable workaholic. If he was physically capable of continuing this discussion, he would. Look at him."

The insufferable workaholic in question can't quite work up the energy to glare at her for being right. Basira only needs to take a cursory look at him before her shoulders sag and she relents.

"Fine," she sighs. "We'll pick this up tomorrow, then."

"Good," Georgie says brightly. "In the meantime – takeaway?"

"Pizza," Melanie blurts out with an almost alarming passion, bolting upright like a sleep-talker after nearly a half-hour of total silence. Jon chokes on a laugh. Almost immediately, the color starts to rise in Melanie's cheeks, and when she glowers at Jon, Georgie can't hold back a giggle.

For a moment, things almost seem… normal. Like there's a way forward after all.

We have a chance of making this work, Jon thinks, and he tells himself that he believes it.

It feels strange, being back in his office after so long away. It's not comfortable by any means, but it's at least familiar. It isn't safe, but it's at least relatively predictable.

Still, he feels on edge. The Archives have always effused an ever-present sense of being watched. Even outside of this place, Jon can't remember what it feels like to *not* be subjected to constant voyeurism. By now, he's used to it. Although this is the Eye's temple and the Watching here is impossible to ignore, it's nothing compared to the reality from which he came: a tower that sees all, a sky that blinks, the Watcher's eyes embedded in his skin and winking in and out in the air around him.

And yet… somehow, standing in his office right now is almost as unbearable as standing right beside the Panopticon. It's a lot like the cabin, in a way. The illusion of safety, if only because the horror you know seems preferable to the unknown waiting just outside your door – but no matter how much you delude yourself, there is always something lurking nearby, letting you suffer just so it can watch. He isn't sure he remembers what safety even feels like. That illusion may well have been shattered with a simple *knock-knock,* taking root in his childhood and echoing down through the years.

He tolerates the discomfort for an entire five minutes before giving up and heading for the cot in Document Storage instead.

As soon as he sits down on the edge, his mind – predictably enough – drifts to Martin. For months he slept here, clutching a corkscrew for comfort and writing letters he never intended to send to a mother who resented him, because he had no one to confide in except for a notebook and cobwebs. There were so many nights that Jon was just down the hall, sleeping in stops and starts at his desk. After Martin's encounter with Prentiss, Jon started spending more and more days working late into the night, finding more and more excuses to not go home at the end of the day. At the time, he told himself it was because he had so much work to do; the truth is that he couldn't stand to leave Martin alone overnight in this place.

Sometimes they would stumble across each other in the breakroom in the middle of the night, matching shadows under their eyes, and Jon never knew what to say. He never was good at comforting people – or being comforted. At least, not at that point in his life.

The way Jon treated Martin back then, how little he appreciated him, how much he pushed him away just because he was too afraid to–

And *now*, what he wouldn't give just to–

Jon sighs. Coming to Document Storage may have been a bad idea.

Georgie walks by the open door with purpose, belatedly catches sight of him, backtracks, and enters the room.

“Hey, I was looking for you. You weren’t in your office, and…” She trails off. “You’re crying.”

Is he? He brings one hand to his cheek and it comes away wet.

Oh.

Georgie approaches and sits next to him on the cot.

“Do you want to talk about–” She cuts herself off with a grimace. “I guess that might not be an option right now.”

It really isn’t. He can barely string his own thoughts together, let alone pull something from the Archive. He gives her a weak smile, though – he appreciates the offer.

“In the dream, then? I know there are things we can’t talk about there, but…”

She sighs, then looks up, returns a small smile, and opens her arms a little – leaving him with the choice of whether to initiate contact. When he was living with her, he had become so jumpy – both touch averse and touch starved at the same time. She’d picked up on it without him saying a word, and adjusted accordingly: she would extend the invitation, and let him decide whether and on what terms he would accept. It was remarkably similar to her approach to the Admiral, Jon had joked once.

The fact that she still remembers – well, it hasn’t been as long for her as it has for him, he supposes, but *still*, the consideration is enough to bring more tears to his eyes. He doesn’t

have to think twice before he practically collapses into her. He tries desperately to stifle himself because he knows, he *knows* that if he lets go, he'll shatter into the kind of heaving sobs that leave him feeling raw and vulnerable. It doesn't work. The dam breaks and she says nothing for several minutes, just lets him cling to her and cry until all that remains are hiccups and shallow breaths.

An eternity passes before he finally releases his grip and draws back, hiding his face in his sleeve.

"I've never seen you cry so much," Georgie says softly. When he tenses, she adds: "It's not a bad thing. I think it's long-overdue." Not entirely true; he'd shed plenty of tears during the apocalypse. Georgie must interpret his reaction as disagreement with the first statement rather than the second, though, because she continues: "When it happens, let it happen. It won't make everything better, but it will make things *feel* better, at least for a little bit."

She is right, he knows. If nothing else, it takes the edge off, at least momentarily.

"Listen, I have to get back home. It's late, and the Admiral hasn't eaten yet."

Jon nods – *I understand* – and without being prompted begins to unwind her scarf from where it still rests draped over his shoulders.

"Keep it," she says. "You like the texture, right?" He suddenly notices how he's rubbing the fabric between his fingers, and wonders just how much he's been doing that over the past few hours. Almost nonstop, he's willing to bet. "Besides, it looks good on you." He scoffs, still a bit tear-choked, nudges her with his shoulder, and tries to ignore that hateful voice in his head telling him that this is a going-away gift. And then: "Take care of yourself, okay?"

He goes rigid. Georgie – of course – notices immediately.

"I'm coming back, Jon," she says gently. "I'll probably be back tomorrow afternoon. I'll bring some things with me. If you're going to be staying here… I know this place will never feel like a home, but maybe we can at least make it feel a little less…" She wrinkles her nose. "Well, sinister."

Given how long he's gone without any stable base, homelike or no, it actually is better than nothing. Even before he ended the world, he hadn't had a place to call home for years. The closest he got was the safehouse in Scotland, and that… that was only because Martin was there. Jon Knew that there was no such thing as a place where they could be truly safe, but Martin made him *feel* safe, which meant that he could pretend that they *were* safe, if only for a little while.

And then Jon destroyed that, too.

"Hang in there," Georgie says. "Try to get some sleep. You look like you need it, and if we dream at the same time, we can talk there."

She holds her arms open and once again he welcomes the contact, though this time he manages to keep from completely crumbling. It's just… he spent so long without any kind touch at all, let alone a full embrace. After losing Martin, the closest he got was Helen touching his shoulder once, and that was only to startle him. It made his skin crawl, and her resulting laugh made his bones ache, and he *hated* it – but the worst part was how much his heart sank when she withdrew her hand.

When Georgie releases him and stands to leave, she pauses at the threshold. "Do you want the door closed?"

Jon's heart stutters in his throat. With a quiet, strangled noise, he shakes his head *no.* He looks away in embarrassment, berating himself for the overreaction. Georgie certainly notices, but she doesn't call attention to it. It's just one more item on the list of reasons to be grateful to her.

"Okay. I'm off to say goodnight to Melanie." She smiles. He can see that it's intended to be reassuring, but exhaustion and worry show in the lines under her eyes. "I'll see you tomorrow. Promise."

Jon doesn't sleep, of course. He doesn't even try.

He just can't stop thinking: What if his inability to use his own voice carries over into the dream? Or what if he can't speak at all? He doesn't know which would be worse. What if he finds himself back in the role of unblinking, unmoving Watcher? How would he explain the sudden change to the… to his victims? All the rapport they've built up over the past couple months will be undone.

He will be the monster in their nightmares again – *all eyes, all eyes, all eyes* – and he doesn't have it in himself to deny it. Even if he wanted to, he wouldn't have the words.

The prospect of it is more than enough to keep him awake.

The next day, Jon is practically useless.

"Did you even sleep at all?" Georgie asks, arms crossed.

Jon doesn't look up to meet her eyes when he shakes his head *no.*

"Why not?"

Because I'm terrified, he wants to say.

Instead, he shrugs. *"I've always had problems sleeping."*

The words are difficult to string together and even more difficult to voice – like talking through a mouthful of peanut butter.

"Yeah, I know that," Georgie says. "But there's more, isn't there?"

Sometimes he wishes Georgie wasn't so perceptive.

"Something I didn't want to talk about," he says vaguely, wincing as he speaks.

"Fine," Georgie sighs. "You don't have to talk about it right this second. But this discussion isn't over. You *need* to talk to someone, even if it has to be in metaphor or whatever. It doesn't have to be me, but you can't keep these things bottled up. Okay?"

Jon lets out a heavy sigh, but he does nod.

"Right. You hungry? You didn't eat anything last night."

He shakes his head *no*.

"What about in the other way?"

Jon shuts his eyes. There's no point in lying to her – she would know – and he *is* trying to be more open about these things. He dreads the others looking at him like he's inhuman again – no matter how deserved – once they know how all-consuming the hunger becomes. But they need to know how dangerous he is at any given time, so they know what steps to take to keep him from hurting anyone. His self-esteem is low-priority.

"…it's always there at the edges," he admits. He tries to cover his grim tone with a tight smile.

"Well, this is an archive. You have plenty of statements lying around." She pauses. "Will those *work*, or…?"

"…might have made his present state slightly more bearable – he could still feel the hunger, but–"

"–that was enough for my purposes–"

"–just to appease the thing–"

"–can help with the pressure–"

"–some satisfaction in the end."

"Do you want me to… bring you one? I don't know what I'm looking for, exactly, but if you–"

"…perhaps they asked you if you were going to record, and you shook your head: maybe later."

He would rather hold off on the statements – even the stale ones – until absolutely necessary. It's doubtful that detoxing will work in this situation. Last time, starving the Beholding didn't do anything to alleviate the need. If anything, it made it worse. But by this point, he's made a hobby of spiting the Ceaseless Watcher whenever possible, no matter how fruitless or petty it ultimately is. How much control he has over his life is a question that will never be answered to his satisfaction, but he'll grab those moments of agency whenever he can, even if he is only fooling himself.

"If you're sure," Georgie says uncertainly. "But if you aren't going to sleep or eat, maybe you want to get some fresh air–"

Jon shakes his head adamantly.

"If you're going to be staying here, you'll need some things. We could just go around the corner and–"

"…the danger was too acute."

“You’ll have supervision. We can cover your eyes, and–” Seeing the expression on his face, Georgie stops herself. She forces a smile, but he can see the sadness in it. “Okay. Make me a list – or, I’ll help you make a list – and I can pick some things up for you.” Jon gives her a grateful nod and a thumbs up. “I’m going to go check in on Melanie. Think of what you need and I’ll be back later.”

In a private prison cell, Jonah Magnus – also known as Elias Bouchard, née James Wright, née Richard Mendelson, née nearly a dozen other hollowed out and discarded vessels – sits placidly, biding his time and watching the proceedings with great anticipation.

He is inordinately pleased to see that his Archivist has finally chosen to accept his role. Granted, he does not know what his role entails, any more than he knew what he was agreeing to when he accepted the Head Archivist position. But does it really matter whether he was privy to all the fine print? He may not have *wanted* this, but he did *choose* this nonetheless – and *oh*, how he's taken to it, like a moth to the flame.

Jonah will proudly admit that his greatest gift has always been his ability to read a person, even before his allegiance to the Ceaseless Watcher. He didn’t need the Eye’s assistance to know from the very beginning that Jonathan Sims is as near perfect a candidate as he could have hoped for. The details revealed to him by the Beholding only confirmed his first impression of his target: Web-marked at a tender age, leaving him primed for future manipulation and a chronic fear thereof; a desperate yearning to make himself useful, having learned young that the surest pathway to lukewarm approval was to avoid being a burden; isolationist tendencies, left over from a childhood characterized by loss and rejection and an acute awareness that he was unwanted and unlikable; a nigh-insurmountable intolerance of emotional intimacy, because he never quite learned how to trust and, thus, how to let himself be vulnerable.

Jon has always been either *too much* or *not enough*, and from that revelation he gleaned an important lesson: it is *safer* to keep people from getting too close or knowing him too well. That way, the abandonment he has come to expect will never leave too keen a sting. And if his conviction regarding the inevitability of rejection is precisely the problem, well… Jon cannot tolerate that kind of scrutiny long enough to break that self-fulfilling prophecy, even – perhaps especially – from himself.

Jonah has found over the years that the lack of a support network is a vital ingredient for managing a target. When Jonah selected him, Jon had no close attachments and seemed highly unlikely to develop any. Even when he wasn't being deliberately abrasive to keep people at arm's length, he turned people off with a tendency to either talk too much (he never quite outgrew that childhood reputation as an insufferable know-it-all) or too little (making him seem haughty and unapproachable). As far as Jonah could tell, it was rare that someone would tolerate Jon long enough to see a palatable side of him – and Jon knew that, and used it as a shield.

Jon is a perfect mixture of distrust and self-doubt and impulsivity and, yes, *loneliness*, though he would never admit to that last. As a bonus, he came prepackaged with the heavy weight of survivor's guilt, which is always an easy weakness to exploit. It took only a few subtle nudges and the ambient influence of the Eye to tip him into full-blown paranoia and self-sabotage. He has a truly impressive propensity for overthinking and indecision; he overwhelms himself with so many variables and possibilities that he can never actually reach a conclusion, which means that no matter how close he comes to solving a puzzle, he will never actually place that final piece.

Most importantly, there is his insatiable curiosity. The *obsessiveness.* The stubborn refusal – the *inability* – to let a question go unasked or unanswered. These things are innate to him, fatal flaws that marked him long before any of the Dread Powers took note of him, necessary qualifications for an Avatar of the Beholding.

All of that together makes Jonathan Sims so very, very easy to manipulate. It's as if he was born to be consigned to the Ceaseless Watcher. Jonah could not have chosen a more suitable Archivist, and he is nothing but pleased with the progress and promise he has shown.

And yet… Jonah must force himself to admit to some apprehension regarding these newest developments. He did not expect – did not even imagine the possibility – that the Archivist would awaken without a voice of his own.

In some ways, this is a boon: it will no doubt exacerbate the preexisting strife and miscommunication between the Archivist and his dwindling band of grudging allies. If it hasn't yet obliterated what fragile trust still remained between them, it's only a matter of time. The estrangement will push Jon further and further into despair. Left alone with only his own catastrophizing thoughts, he will be unable to drown out the call of the Beholding; he will act recklessly in pursuit of any shallow pretense of control; he will have no one to keep him in check when he inevitably gives in to his new existence and all that it entails.

He will, in a word, self-destruct – and in the vacancy left behind, the Archive will take root and thrive.

However, there is the possibility that Jon's new… *limitations* will curtail his use of compulsion. He can likely still exercise that power even if he must do so through others' words, but it won't be as convenient or as easy. If he has to put forethought into using the ability, he may be less likely to use it by mistake or on a whim – and part of what Jonah likes so much about Jon is just how much he spirals in the aftermath of his mistakes. Compelling people – especially accidentally – would whittle away at Jon's already flimsy sense of self-control, which would have been ideal.

Also problematic is that Jon seems to have already noticed his growing need to feed on live prey, such that he has apparently placed himself under house arrest in order to avoid doing so. It's only a temporary setback, however. Jon won't be able to resist forever; he always has had an addictive personality. Regardless of whatever newfound sense self-control he may *think* he has, Jon does not actually have much choice in *whether* he serves the Beholding, only how and when and at whose expense. He's already pledged himself to the Eye, and there's no going back. Its call will only grow louder, and the Archivist will be compelled to answer it, regardless of Jon's feelings on the subject.

Finally, there's the matter of how much Jon claims to Know. It isn't that his Knowing is unexpected; to the contrary, it shows progress, and he had already been showing those promising signs of growth leading up to the Unknowing. But Jon seems to have made a sudden leap in aptitude, and Jonah can't pinpoint a reason *why* – just as he cannot fathom why Jon should suddenly have such control over his nightmares.

Jonah would be lying if he said he wasn't disappointed and more than a little incensed when Jon not only Knew about Melanie King's situation, but managed to convey that information to Georgina Barker. Melanie's encounter with the Slaughter had been so *serendipitous*. She was perfectly situated to provide Jon with the mark of the Slaughter: she already detested him even before he fashioned himself into a pariah among his team, which made him the readiest target for her simmering rage. If the bullet had still been leaching its poison into her when Jon returned to the Archives, it would have been only a matter of time before she tore into him.

No matter; Jonah can improvise. This isn't a devastating setback, just an inconvenient one. Primarily, Jonah simply *hates* not knowing things, perhaps even more than his Archivist

does.

In any case, Jon seems convinced that he has acquired game-changing information. If it was anyone else, Jonah may be tempted to write it off as undeserved confidence. Jon, however, has never been a confident man, despite his occasional bluster. Moreover, he has of late shown some surprising and frankly infuriating competence when it comes to avoiding Jonah's surveillance. He doubts that Jon Knows anything that would lead him to discover Jonah's plans, but Jonah would still like to learn the exact details of what Jon thinks he Knows – whether it will amount to a minor inconvenience or a more serious delay.

It is… *possible* that Jonah underestimated the man.

Jonah is not the Archivist. His abilities of Seeing and Knowing are comparatively limited, and much of his advantage relies on the Archivist never recognizing just how much latent power he really has until it's too late. Another reason why it was vital for Jonah's chosen one to be so susceptible to insecurity and self-loathing: Jon is both unlikely to believe he has any power in this situation and too unambitious to seek dominance in the first place.

A pawn with the capacity to strategize is somewhat more difficult to manage, but Jonah isn't overly worried. He is the chessmaster; he holds the advantage; he is ultimately in control. His pawns can run around scheming in tunnels and chasing red herrings all they like. They haven't the faintest idea of the Watcher's Crown, nor any bread crumbs to lead them to knowledge of its existence. Without the complete picture, they don't even know what game they're playing. They stand no chance of denying Jonah his destined throne.

This is uncharted territory, so it stands to reason that there will be unforeseen developments. If nothing else, Jonah is pleased to have gotten so far on his first try. It might even be a good thing that the distinction between the Archivist and the Archive is blurring so soon, that Jon is already losing his grip on his humanity so thoroughly. The more his sense of self unravels, the closer he comes to his fated apotheosis.

Jonah Magnus is good at waiting, but he cannot deny his mounting impatience as his long-awaited victory looms ever closer. He focuses his gaze on his hapless Archivist – alone in his office, once again immersed in some foolish, truly futile attempt to defy his nature – and he smiles.

Entertainment is hard to come by these days. If nothing else, this certainly is *fascinating* to watch.

Jon hisses as he flexes his fingers, trying to chase away the pins-and-needles pain rippling through his hands and up his arms. It had seemed safe to assume that the Beholding would enforce the same restrictions on typing as it does on writing, but he figured it was worth a try.

All he wanted to do was pull up an online shopping catalog – it didn't even matter which one, he just wanted to be able to point at things on the screen. It would at least give him a starting point, and from there Georgie could ask him questions to narrow down what he was requesting, instead of having to delve into the Archive for some roundabout way of saying, *if you could get me some unscented bar soap that would be great, because I can't handle most of the popular scents ever since that time I got kidnapped by the Circus, and liquid soap feels too much like lotion so* that's *always an ordeal; and some disposable gloves would be nice because when I need to wash my hair I usually can't handle the texture of shampoo either and I prefer to avoid direct skin contact as much as possible and I got used to Martin helping me but he isn't here; which, speaking of, some two-in-one shampoo/conditioner would probably be good, because that way I can just get it over with and I only have to risk* one *undue emotional breakdown per shower, so if you could – actually, never mind, please forget the last several things I said, that was way too much information; I spent the last… a long time just* surviving *in the wreckage of a ruined world, so I have no idea why I'm being picky; I'm grateful for anything you can bring me, you're really going out of your way for me and frankly I don't deserve it; and I'm terrified that you'll realize that, and then you'll leave, and you would be right to, but I don't* want *you to, and isn't that selfish of me, isn't that–*

Whatever; it doesn't matter. Jon got two characters into a search query before the tremors started, and attempting to follow through on his intention to press another key brought on the avalanche of pain still crashing over him. He's half-tempted to push through it – it's not like he's unaccustomed to physical pain – but the moment he has that thought, his joints lock up. He doesn't know why he even bothered.

A post-apocalyptic Google, reduced to this, he thinks viciously.

It's not that he *misses* being a post-apocalyptic Google, it's just…

He sighs.

Who is he fooling? He *does* miss it. And he hates that about himself – these little bursts of longing for what he left behind, these moments of nostalgia for *the fucking apocalypse* – but there's no use denying it. There was an overwhelming sense of comfort and security in being able to just *Know* things – and having that ocean of knowledge at his fingertips had felt so *natural*, so *right*.

He's spent his whole life grappling with that incessant need to know – fueled, of course, by a poorly-masked fear of the unknown – and for such a long time, he had the freedom to nurture the first and the power to strangle the second. He had near-complete control over his ability to Know, excepting the occasional tidbit that would slip through when he wasn't paying attention and a select handful of questions that the Beholding refused – or was unable – to answer. Now, he's back to grasping for scraps leaking through the crack in the door and being subjected to whatever intrusive trivia the Eye wants to drop on him without warning. It's just… frustrating, and–

Jon snaps to attention, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. The feeling of being watched is background radiation in his life at this point, and it's part of the atmosphere of the Archives for everyone who finds themselves here. There are some moments, though – like now – when that awareness intensifies, like a microscope slide being brought into focus.

Jonah, probably, Jon tells himself with a shudder. It was only a matter of time before he started making his presence known again. Thinking back, Oliver might have been onto something when he referred to the Eye's influence as *slimy.* It certainly does feel like a residue – one that can never be truly scoured away.

He's just about to write off the gooseflesh and chills as the sort of casual, low-level, pre-apocalyptic voyeurism he needs to readjust to, to force himself to ignore it and *not* give Jonah Magnus the satisfaction of seeing him rattled, when Jon registers the drop in temperature.

The moment he notices his breath fogging, he bolts upright in his chair. Without thinking, he calls out.

"Martin?"

The name tears its way up and out of his throat in dozens of overlapping tones, each instance recorded in the Archive layered one on top of the other and broadcast simultaneously. He flinches, both from the way it shakes him to his core and with a fear of how it might be received.

He can just barely make out a sharp intake of breath, coming from somewhere near the open office door, and he could swear his heart stops.

Jon stands, takes a step toward where he Knows Martin is standing, and begins a mad scramble for words.

"I called for him to stay still, to wait there–"

"–I wanted to say something reassuring, to reach out and let him know I was still there–"

"–I knew I would do everything in my power to help him–"

"–I asked him if I could help–"

Martin probably doesn't know why he's speaking like this. What if it scares him away?

Panicked, Jon combs through Martin's statements, always close at hand:

"I need him *to be okay–"*

"–I'm sorry I left you – we got separated – I – I tried shouting, but you didn't answer. I was trying to go back – I wanted to get out of there – I was looking for a way – to get – back–"

"–to come back to you–"

"–I'm sorry – I'm sorry I left you."

Silence. Jon tries again, borrowing fragments from other statements this time, throwing it all together haphazardly:

"…the last time I saw you before I disappeared – I couldn't–"

"–reach out and let him know I was still there–"

"–I'm sorry I left you–"

"–I was still there–"

"–do everything in my power–"

"–to keep a grip on that anchor–"

"–to come back to you–"

Jon breaks off with a ragged gasp, but holds one trembling hand out.

"I need him *to be okay,"* he says again, desperate.

There is a faint shuffling noise, and then he Knows that Martin is turning to leave. Frantically, Jon reaches for Naomi's statement – morbidly fitting, being the first record of the Lonely he ever encountered.

"Could you stay please? I don't want to be alone – stay please – don't – be alone–"

Martin's breath hitches audibly.

"Please – stay please – don't – be alone – please…"

For a moment, he seems to waver at the threshold. Then come the soft footfalls, moving… moving *away*, pace quickening with every step, echoing with resolve and purpose.

Jon can do nothing more than whisper now – *stay, please, stay, I'm sorry, come back, don't be alone* – but it doesn't matter. Martin is well out of earshot, and he's taken the cold and the fog

with him.

No warmth rushes in to fill that empty space.

Jon could chase after him, maybe even catch up with him, but… he knows – not even Knows, just *knows* – that it would make little difference. He's been here once before, after all.

He lowers his hand and sinks to the floor with a sigh, leaning back against his desk with his eyes closed.

Now what?

Chapter End Notes

- As mentioned in the beginning notes of this chapter, there's some lovely fanart for this chapter by audiobon -- you can check it out here!!

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

- Not a super plot-heavy chapter, but I still had some setup to do before I could move along. Pls enjoy the self-indulgent character study and navel gazing and flagrant overuse of the em-dash.

- I KNOW YOU'VE ALL BEEN WAITING FOR MARTIN and as much as I would love to immediately have a fluffy reunion scene btwn these two, you KNOW I have to drag them (and you all) through some angst first. All I can say is, spoiler alert: [points to the Eventual Happy Ending tag] this is a Bury-Your-Gays-Trope-free zone. TMA canon has already got the Tragic Romance angle COVERED.

- Once again: a mountain of citations. I'm dividing it by sections and, like last time, lines clustered together will be separated by forward slashes. As usual, if you want to know what episode a particular line comes from, feel free to ask.

- Jon's verbal dialogue is taken from statements in the following episodes, in order:
In the first section: MAG 161; 145; 161; 085; 006; 133/065; 139; 045; 002; 059; 020; 019; 002; 011; 101/135/153; 032; 052/008/052/045; 050/096/008/014/143; 096; 130; 083/044/019/014/032/138/105/014/054/134/017; 011/122/155/133/067; 155; 136; 059; 066; 161; 147; 148.

In the second section: None, bc Jon is TIRED and needs a nap.
Third section: 074; 121; 143; 166/157/010/129/062; 147; 159.
Fourth section: None; and also, an obligatory FUCK Jonah Magnus.
Fifth section: (skipping Martin's name bc it's in several statements, obviously); 125/063/135/071; 117/040/022/040; 002/063/040/063/135/013/022; 117; 013; 013 (again).

- Final notes: Jonah Magnus Get Fucked CHALLENGE

Pending Arrival

Chapter Summary

In which some visitors arrive, both expected and not.

Chapter Notes

CWs for Chapter 10: brief panic attack; a couple instances of misgendering (not malicious, just some wrong pronouns due to Archive speak); some vague JonMartin apocalypse angst.

(Also, chapter length got away from me again. Sorry!!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's okay, Jon tells himself, forcing himself to breathe the way Martin taught him: *Four seconds in; hold seven seconds; eight seconds out*.

Well… okay, it's *not* okay. It's very, *very* not okay.

...but – four – *it* – five – *will* – six – *be* – seven... *okay, exhale.*

Some time later – *eight minutes, thirty-six-point-eight seconds,* he Knows, though he didn't ask – his breathing evens out and his thoughts clear with it.

That interaction with Martin wasn't unexpected. There's little reason to expect things to be different this time around, especially this soon after Jon woke up. He *knows* this.

There is a wall between him and Martin right now, constructed from a lifetime of rejection and loneliness that Jon himself contributed to for far too long. It's been recently bolstered by

a mountain of grief, loss, and mourning – what should have been years' worth condensed into the last six months – and it's been further reinforced by Peter Lukas' manipulations.

It will take some time to coax Martin away from the Lonely. Hopefully it won't take as long as it did the last time, especially now that Jon knows the hypothetical threat of the Extinction is not as imminent as Peter claims, but still: Martin needs time and space. Besides, Jon simply *can't* force the Lonely out of him with a few words and a prayer. Martin has to choose to reject it of his own volition, or it will always cling to him.

And, most importantly: Martin *deserves* to make his own choice. Jon has no right to take that from him, any more than he did when they passed through the Lonely's domain.

It would have been nice to be able to physically *see* Martin, though. Or even just hear his voice outside of his own head. Memories can only provide so much reassurance, and for so long.

Jon had every intention of continuing yesterday's strategy meeting this afternoon, but already his brief conversation with Georgie and painfully brief interaction with Martin have left him fatigued. The migraine he had expected yesterday failed to reach fruition, but the threat of it still lingers, accompanied by a painless but still unpleasant sensation of pressure in his head, making him feel off-kilter. As of right now, he can still pull on the Archive to speak. Sitting down and strategizing is another matter entirely. Planning ahead has never been part of his skill set. Anxiety, sleep deprivation, and a supernaturally-imparted speech impediment aren't doing him any favors.

"Let me guess: you're out of commission."

Basira looks him up and down, taking in his hunched gargoyle posture in his desk chair, his half-lidded eyes, his fidgety hands: one resting uneasily on top of his desk, fingers twitching and tapping with no discernible rhythm; the other wound up in the scarf Georgie gave him, still draped over his shoulders.

Jon can't tell what characterizes Basira more in this moment: frustration with him, or simple exhaustion. Despite his own hypersensitivity to how others perceive him, he has a feeling that right now, it's the latter.

"I think it can wait until tomorrow," says Georgie, perched on the edge of Jon's desk.

"Fine," Basira concedes. "Tomorrow, then." She knocks twice on the doorframe. When Jon looks up, she catches his eye. "Get some actual sleep tonight, Jon. It's not just your personal mental health on the line here."

"She *is* right about you needing to sleep," Georgie says as Basira leaves. He avoids eye contact. "I'm serious. You look exhausted. I can get you a sleep aid–" Jon shakes his head slowly. "Why?"

With a sudden burst of energy, Jon stands, grabs her hand, and leads her to the entrance to the tunnels. He waits until they've both descended the ladder and the trapdoor is closed behind them before he turns to her and blurts out:

"...too afraid to go to sleep."

"I can sit next to you while you fall asleep if you–"

"...would serve no purpose except to start me having the nightmares again," he mumbles, sinking into the nearest chair.

"You've been having those for a long time now," Georgie says, following his lead and sitting across from him. "And you've figured out how to cope with them. What's *actually* scaring you?"

Jon bites his lower lip and bows his head.

“Then I would watch – once again–”

“–paralyzed with fear–”

“–tried to scream but I couldn’t find my breath, I couldn’t move–”

“–I couldn’t talk to anyone–”

“–unable to move its body, though – its eyes darting around wildly–”

“–unable to move – to cry for help–”

“–unable to look away–”

“–could only stare at him as he slowly, achingly crawled towards his doom–”

“–being unable to reach him–”

“–stare at it, knowing how your – friend suffers, knowing how powerless you are to help–”

“Slow down. You’re worried you’ll go back to how you were before?”

“…could only watch from the sidelines, getting a… a–”

He stops, leaning forward with his head in his hands.

“What is it, Jon?”

“And the worst part was that, somewhere in me, I – I liked it–”

“–it drew me in almost as much as it disgusted me–”

“–getting a… a sad vicarious thrill from–”

“–when people look at me… that fear” – Jon’s breath hitches – *“it feels amazing.”*

He looks up at Georgie.

"Underneath all that awful fear, it felt like… home," he whispers in a haunted tone. The shame crashes over him and he breaks eye contact, ducking his head again.

Georgie is quiet for a long moment. Then, she leans forward, reaches out, and takes his hand. He flinches and freezes.

"It sounds to me like you don't want to like it," she says. "People sometimes have feelings and urges that they aren't proud of. Things that would hurt other people, if acted on." She takes a breath. *"But…* I think it says more about a person's character when they fight back against it."

"…a presence within myself, inside my being–"

"–will strip us of what it means to be human, and leave us something alien and cold."

"I know your circumstances are… different–"

"…it was the product of an otherworldly evil and called to me," he says miserably.

"I know," she says again. "There's something in you, something that came from outside of yourself, and it's trying to change you. Consume you."

"…should have fought harder against the temptation–"

"But you're fighting it now, aren't you? You want things to be different."

"I suppose I had to believe that the darkened natures of our terror could be kept in check – a rather feeble hope, for my own salvation–"

"–as if it might ward whatever awful thing waited inside that door."

“For what it’s worth, I don’t think it’s a *feeble* hope. This is the most sure I’ve ever seen you be about anything.” She jostles his hand until he looks up at her. “You’re not a bad person, Jon. You’re taking extreme steps to make sure you don’t hurt anyone. It might not change the things you’ve done in the past, but neither will beating yourself up over it.”

Jon laughs, wincing when it comes out sounding a bit tear-choked.

“I try to think that I’ve left my past behind, but that sort of denial doesn’t help me sleep.”

“Maybe not. But you don’t have to deny the past in order to move beyond it. You can remember your mistakes and learn from them without letting them define you. And I think… I think you’re going to have to do that, if you want to move forward.” After a moment, Jon nods. Apparently unconvinced, Georgie adds: “Also, I don’t know if you need to be told this, but getting better means actually taking care of yourself.”

Jon chuckles at that, some of his tension bleeding away. *“Thank you for indulging me, you’ve been very patient.”*

“Stop that. You’d do the same for me. You *have* done the same for me.” He opens his mouth to argue. “Yeah, you’re not great at comforting people, I know. But I’ve seen you *try*.”

He must still look dubious, because Georgie sighs heavily.

“Do you remember when I was going through that medication change in uni?”

Jon nods warily.

It had been before they started dating. Jon has never made friends easily, but somehow Georgie had managed to tolerate his company long enough for him to start letting his guard down. At that point in his life, she really was the only one who he could confidently call a friend.

So when the antidepressant she had been on for over a year lost effectiveness and she had to start the arduous process of finding a new one, Jon had a front row seat to a depressive episode – and he felt irretrievably lost. He had no script to follow; he worried incessantly that he was making things worse, that he wasn't making himself useful enough, that he was intruding on her personal space and she just didn't have the energy to tell him the truth. He would pace restlessly and trip over his words and lapse into uncomfortable silences, wringing his hands and brooding – being more of a nuisance than a help, he was certain.

"You didn't know how to help," Georgie says, as if reading his mind. "You couldn't make me better. I could tell it was driving you mad, not having an answer, because there *was* no simple answer. It was just… something that had to be lived through, coped with – and you've never been able to tolerate that concept, I know. You're not good at waiting." Jon huffs – only because she's right. *"But,"* Georgie says emphatically, "you spent time with me, even though I was no fun. Brought me takeaway, set alarms to remind yourself to ask me if I'd taken my meds, did all this – this *reading* and research on how to support a loved one in crisis, which was" – she chuckles – "very *you*."

Jon focuses intently on the weave of his scarf, petting it absently with his free hand, tracing the knit with his fingertips.

"You stayed anyway, even though you were uncomfortable. You didn't say as much, but you're fairly obvious when you're anxious. At one point I told you I didn't want you to fix it, I just didn't want to be alone, and… you respected that. Which surprised me, to be honest. I was certain you'd be stubborn about it, act like you knew better than me." Jon smiles at that. It was a fair assumption for her to make, especially back then. "Probably never would've considered dating you if you hadn't proven me wrong then."

"Until he became me–"

"–moody, short-tempered, constantly on edge."

He gives Georgie a wry look as he says it, though, and she laughs.

"You've always been moody and on edge, including then. That wasn't a new development that grew up overnight. What I'm saying is you've never been *just* that – which is why I have expectations of you, because I know what you're capable of." She gives him a serious look.

“Like I told you years ago, you need to stop seeing things in black-and-white – *including* when it’s about you. Not everything has a clear-cut answer. You’d be happier if you could make peace with that.”

“And he was aware of it always – could not disagree,” Jon says with an exaggerated eye roll.

“Of course I’m right,” she quips back. “But you’re trying, and that’s all I ask.”

The ensuing silence is a comfortable one. Jon uses the lapse as an opportunity to search for a way to ask after Melanie.

“Statement of Georgina Barker regarding–”

Jon pauses. There’s really no way of saying the next part without drawing on more than one statement, but… Georgie is safe, and the phrase only appears a couple of times in the Archive, so it shouldn’t be *too* powerful.

“*Statement of Melanie King.”*

There *is* a reverb to the words, but the lightheadedness that comes with it is mild and passes quickly. Georgie appears to notice the odd tenor of his voice, tilting her head slightly to track the sound, but she doesn’t pursue it.

“You’re asking how Melanie is?”

“I wanted to check in with them, find out what happened.”

“She’s… having a rough day. I don’t think it’s my place to say more than that.”

Jon nods again: *I understand.* Then, he repeats again: *"Statement of Georgina Barker."*

Georgie leans forward, elbow on knee, chin propped up by her fist. Her other hand continues to hold Jon's, but she loosens her grip somewhat. The crease between her eyebrows is familiar to him – Georgie is taking her time to inventory her thoughts before speaking. He waits.

"I'm… hm. It's been a lot to process," she says carefully. "I think I'm doing okay for the moment? I'm mostly worried about Melanie. I've *been* worried about Melanie, but… after what you said about quitting – it's complicated things a bit. It's something we needed to know," she adds, seeing Jon's guilty expression. "I'm glad you were honest with us. Actually, I think Melanie was surprised that you told us about the, ah, second way to quit. It… hmm. It doesn't fit with the image she has of you." Jon snorts at the delicate phrasing, and Georgie gives him a sheepish smile. "Sorry, but she still thinks you're a self-serving prick."

Jon shrugs, unperturbed. He already knew that, and it's not like he's done much to dissuade Melanie of that assessment. Not yet, anyway.

"Oh, but she told me to reassure you that she isn't going to kill you in your sleep, so that's something? I told her that's *not* why you pulled an all-nighter, but she said to let you know anyway."

Jon laughs, and Georgie's eyes crinkle when she returns a smile. After a moment, though, it fades.

"I did want to ask, though… did Melanie find out how to quit in your future as well?" Jon nods. "In that case – I'm not sure if you were planning on it, but in case you were… don't tell me just yet what her decision was where you came from. I've been tempted to ask, but I haven't talked it over with Melanie yet, and I think that's her call to make. Okay?" Jon nods again. "And… she's still angry with you – with a lot of things, really, but especially this place, and she sees you as inseparable from it."

"They're not entirely wrong," Jon accedes.

“I did talk to her about it. She asked me to let you know that she does want to talk to you – I know she has some questions to ask – but that she doesn’t want you near her right now. She’s trying to sort through her feelings towards you – figure out how much of it is a you problem versus a her problem versus a both-of-you problem. She needs some space to do that. And it’s not the only thing she’s working through right now.”

Jon can appreciate that. Honestly, it’s better than he could have hoped for. Last time around, Melanie *had* eventually softened on him, had even tentatively called him a friend – but at that point, everything in his life felt like too little too late, and she deserved better than to have him poison her life again. When he sought her out that last time, he really *had* only been looking for someone to help him parse Martin’s intentions – Jon has always struggled with anything less than direct, explicit communication – but Georgie was right to be angry with him. Regardless of his intentions, he *was* inseparable from the Institute. There was no way for him to ask for advice that didn’t involve dragging Melanie back into exactly the kind of toxicity she was trying to escape.

When he left that day, it was with the intention of staying out of both of their lives from then on. They both set a firm boundary, and they deserved to have it respected. But he had plenty of time to brood during the apocalypse, and there were so many things left unsaid between him and Melanie and Georgie. Even if the world hadn’t ended, he probably wouldn’t have approached them again. They seemed happy, and showing up on their doorstep to talk, even if it was just to apologize, would have only been for his own benefit. It wouldn’t have felt right to intrude on them again and open up old wounds just for the sake of securing closure for himself.

Now, though? Truth be told, he could use some space, himself. He’s rehearsed it many times before – all the things he might say to the people in his life, both living and dead, if he had a chance to see them again – but now that he actually *has* that chance, everything he’s drafted in his head feels inadequate. It may take some time to get his thoughts in order before sitting down and openly discussing his and Melanie’s fraught relationship.

“So… Martin?” Georgie says, snapping Jon out of his thoughts. “Have you seen him yet?”

Jon makes an uncertain tilting motion with his hand, finding no succinct way to explain that yes, he did have a brief encounter with Martin, but it was a one-sided conversation, and Jon expected as much, but it still *hurt;* and moreover, Martin was invisible when he visited, no doubt intending to just see for himself that Jon was awake, to check in on how he was doing without being noticed; and Jon wishes he had been able to do the same, to have some

irrefutable physical reassurance that Martin is alive and real and *here* and *now*, because it's been *so long*, and…

"…he seemed determined to avoid – me," Jon settles on instead.

"You care about him a lot, don't you?"

"I need him to be okay–"

"–the easy, charming man I'd fallen in love with."

"Oh," Georgie says, sounding stunned. Jon meets her eyes with a quizzical expression. "I just – knowing you, I figured you'd still be in denial about how infatuated you are? Or, at best, you'd grudgingly admit you maybe, *possibly* had a little crush? I was *not* expecting a declaration of love."

"Everything about being with him felt so natural that when he told me he loved me, it only came as a surprise to realize that we hadn't said it already–"

"–and together it seemed like we would get past our pain."

"Holy shit," Georgie murmurs. "You're absolutely besotted. I mean, I knew you were, you talked about him *all the time* and you're not as subtle as you think you are – but actually *acknowledging* it?"

"…honestly it's one of the few decisions I've ever made that I completely understand," Jon replies, not bothering to hide his small smile.

"Wow. You've… changed more than I thought." Georgie mirrors his expression, but then she falters, chewing the inside of her cheek for a moment. "Can I ask how it – if it…" Jon's smile fades too, but he makes a beckoning gesture: *It's okay; go on.* "Regardless of whether things worked out between you, I… well, I have a hard time thinking you'd come back to this time if it meant leaving him behind in your future?"

Jon looks down at their linked hands, expressionless as he begins to construct a response.

"I'll skip over the bit where–"

"–taking me in his arms and giving me the last and longest hug I would ever get from him–"

"–he was gone. Just gone. And I was alone again. There was no one I could talk to about it–"

"–I had plenty of time to mourn him–"

"–it took all my self-control to keep a grip on that anchor, as I slowly dragged myself away from the edge of my lonely grave."

Georgie gives his hand a reassuring squeeze, which he returns gratefully.

"I'm so sorry," she says. "For what it's worth, I… I'm glad you have this second chance. You… *are* going to tell him how you feel this time as well, right?"

Obviously, he wants to say, but it's not as simple as he wishes it was. He frowns thoughtfully as he searches for a way to explain the situation.

"...he's been so lonely–"

"–embraced the loneliness like an old friend–"

"–for a creature of the Lonely, the urge is to isolate, never to communicate or connect–"

"–I wanted to say something reassuring, to reach out and let him know I was still there–"

"But it was like this last time you woke up, too." She waits for his affirmative before continuing: "So you can do it again."

"...I managed it eventually, but my inability to speak–"

"–I found him difficult to talk to at length."

"But," she persists, "you aren't going to give up, right?"

"...I knew he would return eventually," Jon says.

"Good," Georgie says with a relieved, somewhat exasperated sigh. "I swear to god, if you'd gotten fatalistic just then, I'd have had some words for you." Jon chuckles. "Seriously, though, you'll figure this out. You've always been stubborn. Every now and then, it's even an asset."

"I'm grateful to her, of course."

"Again, don't mention it. As long as you keep trying, I'll support you. I might set limits on how much I'm willing to get involved with the actual supernatural bits – I haven't decided just yet – but when I need to step back, I'll tell you. I'm not going to ghost you just because you don't grovel."

Jon groans at the pun, which gets a self-satisfied grin out of Georgie.

"Oh, shut up. It was a good one."

Right, I forgot: comatose people don't need pens, Jon thinks irritably to himself the next day, turning his office upside-down looking for a writing utensil.

He's so thoroughly preoccupied with rummaging through his desk that he doesn't notice Basira standing in the doorway until she clears her throat, startling him so badly that he jumps and slams one of his fingers in the drawer. He yelps in pain and pulls his hand back,

shaking it out to distract from the throbbing. A moment later, the realization crosses his mind that it's the same finger he'd tried to cut off the last time he was here.

It's a coincidence, he tells himself before his mind can wander too far down the rabbit hole. He has enough to worry about without getting bogged down in the hypotheticals of time travel and sci-fi tropes about the changeability of the past. Besides, the Coffin hasn't even arrived yet; there are still a few weeks before the original date of his failed self-amputation attempts.

"Sorry," Basira says, eyebrows raised. "Didn't mean to scare you. Honestly, I figured you'd just *know* I was here." Jon has nothing to say to that. Trying to explain the fine details of Knowing has never been a pleasant experience, and he couldn't tackle that subject now even if he'd wanted to. "What are you looking for, anyway?"

"...think of me as an idiot who turned up to give a statement without a pen," Jon says distractedly, opening another drawer and sifting through it. *"I can't find it anywhere."*

"Pens?" Jon nods without looking up. "Yeah, I threw them all out – don't give me that look. Half of them didn't even work, and the others looked like a puppy's chew toys. Besides, most of what I threw out in here got touched by the Flesh. You didn't want any of it back, trust me." Jon grimaces. "Yeah. Anyway, there are boxes in the supply closet – but I think I can do you one better."

She tosses something at him. He notices the movement belatedly and just barely manages to catch the thing, nearly dropping it.

"Guess knowing things also doesn't extend to being able to judge a trajectory without fumbling," Basira deadpans.

Jon looks down at the phone in his hands, then back up at Basira.

"Got the Institute to cover it as a work expense. I have no idea where the one you had before the Unknowing ended up; I'm assuming it blew up along with everything else." Basira leans

back against the doorframe. “I’m sure texting will go about as well for you as typing has, but Georgie downloaded a few AAC apps for you to try.”

He gives Basira a tentative smile.

“You’re welcome,” she says with a curt nod. The look she gives him then is curious – almost like she’s still trying to get a read on him, debating how much closeness she can risk. Then her guard goes back up and her tone turns authoritative again. “You can practice with them later. Meeting’s in a half-hour.”

Before Jon can respond, Basira turns and leaves. He looks down at the phone in his hand again. It’s uncertain how the Archive will take to this newest workaround, but there’s only one way to find out.

“Here, let me take–”

Jon unceremoniously drops the box of statements down through the trapdoor, where it hits the ground below with a dull thud and a puff of dust.

“…or not,” Georgie finishes.

“Was that really necessary?” Basira calls from the bottom of the ladder.

Completely pointless, Jon thinks to himself a bit giddily, ignoring the stabbing pain in his temples with relish. The Beholding can complain all it wants about him mishandling statements. Right now, he’s too tired and too delirious to care.

He had plenty of time during the apocalypse to develop methods of coping with the Eye’s intrusiveness. The most emotionally satisfying one he happened upon basically amounted to

random acts of spite. It had no material effect on anything – aside from triggering varying degrees of headaches, but he already got those anyway. It was no different than a petulant child slamming a bedroom door, but it gave him that fleeting feeling of being in control of *something,* and it felt good.

"Let me go first," Georgie says. He gives her a questioning look. "You're using a cane, Jon. There's a fifty percent chance you're going to fall on your ass going down that ladder, and I'd rather keep you out of the hospital for the rest of the year." Jon averts his eyes and frowns. She must interpret it as reluctance, because she clarifies: "You need a spotter."

Jon signals agreement and she starts down the ladder ahead of him.

The thing is, he wasn't trying to contradict her. It's just… well, he's still getting used to the idea of being cared for again, especially when it comes to insignificant things. Yes, his leg is acting up today, but it's not *that* bad – the cane is just to keep it from getting any *worse.* Even if he *did* fall, it's not like it would kill him. It would be inconvenient, unpleasant, and probably embarrassing, but too temporary to really register on his distress scale.

Anyway, he's grown desensitized to physical pain. Or… no, that's not quite right. What he's desensitized to isn't the pain itself, but the experience of being harmed. He's come to expect it, and these days only the only permanent injuries he receives are those inflicted by one of the Powers. Everything else heals too quickly and completely to feel consequential. Most things don't even scar anymore, and those that do – well, what's one more scar?

He knows it's not a healthy mindset. Even before the world ended, he'd come to regard his body with a sense of detachment. In retrospect, he should've known that his rib wouldn't work as an anchor. Most days, his body didn't even feel like it belonged to him. Then, as if to confirm that inkling, Jonah reduced him to a mouthpiece; the Watcher's eyes started manifesting on and around him; his presence became synonymous with that of the Eye to anyone who beheld him. He confirmed on several occasions that he wasn't able to die. Even the Hunt couldn't kill him. Jon would *end* one day, like everything else, but a mundane physical death was beyond him.

He doesn't Know if that's still the case now. He's been too afraid to chase an answer.

So, yes, he's developed a cavalier attitude towards personal safety. Avoiding minor injuries feels on par with what temperature the water is before he steps into the shower: relevant in terms of his own comfort, but otherwise frivolous. He's always spared little thought as to his own comfort, and it's only gotten worse since becoming the Archivist. The apocalypse didn't exactly have much to offer in the way of comfort anyway, especially after…

Jon cringes as he stops to reflect on that train of thought. It took him fewer than thirty seconds to rationalize… well, Martin would have called it self-harm. Or self-sabotage, at the least. Georgie probably would, too, if she could see inside his mind right now. His judgment of what counts as worthy of concern is decidedly skewed, especially to an outside observer. It was easy to justify it to himself when it was just him alone at the end of the world, but employing a mindset forged in hopelessness and tailored to a doomed future is only going to be maladaptive here and now.

He should probably take some time later to unpack all of that. It would be *easier* if he could write it all out; it's always difficult to keep track of his own thoughts without a visual aid, but–

"Jon?" Georgie calls up to him. "You can come down now."

Deal with it later, he tells himself, tossing his cane down for Georgie to catch. As he makes his way down the ladder, his leg does twinge a bit, but it holds his weight well enough, and he reaches the bottom without incident.

"Where's Melanie?" Basira asks.

"Resting," Georgie says, handing Jon his cane. "She had a bad morning. I'll fill her in on everything later."

"Fine." Basira nudges the box with her foot. "What's this then?"

"Statements," Georgie says. She'd watched Jon throw them haphazardly into the box before coming down here. "Not sure why, though."

Jon moves the box to one of the chairs that they left in the tunnel last night. It isn't too heavy – just some pertinent statements and tapes that he thought might make this discussion flow more smoothly. Taking a seat in the next chair over, he removes the lid from the box and begins rummaging.

"Statement of Joshua Gillespie, regarding his time in possession of an apparently empty wooden casket," Jon says after a moment, holding up a folder labeled *CASE #9982211* and containing the respective written statement. One page sticks out crookedly, and Jon's heart skips a beat when he recognizes Tim's handwriting. This had been one of his cases to follow up on.

He shakes his head and sets the folder aside, reaching into the box for the corresponding tape. Instead, his fingertips brush against a different loose cassette, and his breath catches in his throat.

"Statement of Detective Alice 'Daisy' Tonner," he says quietly, removing the cassette. *"Traffic stop of a delivery van."*

"This is the statement Daisy gave you?" Basira says. "She said you compelled her."

"I didn't realize that was what had happened until afterwards," Jon says softly. He pulls a tape recorder from his pocket and gives Basira a questioning look.

"Yeah," she says roughly. "Yeah, go ahead."

Jon inserts the cassette and fast-forwards, stopping when he Knows he's reached the right timestamp. His own recorded voice begins to play.

> *"If you don't mind me asking, h-h-how long have you been sectioned now–"*

"I do mind," comes Daisy's clipped voice. Then, immediately: *"Fourteen years."*

"I don't suppose you'd like to make a statement?"

"About what?"

"Whatever you like. Fourteen years – you must have seen a number of paranormal things."

"And you want me to tell you about them."

"Uh – I-I-I-I-I–"

"Okay."

"What?"

"Okay. I'll give you a statement about – how I got my first Section 31." A beat. *"You look surprised."*

"I mean, I was largely asking as a formality. Basira didn't give me the impression you were the sharing sort."

"Maybe you caught me in a good mood."

"Right, well… good. Do you need me to go over our non-disclosure policy–"

"Not as long as you understand my policy: if it gets out, I'll break every bone in your body."

"There are worse things that could happen to them," the Jon on the tape mutters.

Jon hits stop and looks up at Basira. There's a sheen to her eyes; he does her the courtesy of looking away and not drawing attention to it. After a long few seconds, she clears her throat. When she speaks, her voice is even and impassive.

"So you really didn't know you were compelling people back then."

"...he had no idea what was about to happen to him."

He probably should have noticed sooner, but he was always so fixated on listening to the answer to a question that he paid comparatively little attention to the asking of it. Insensitive of him, really – far too like the detached fascination of the Ceaseless Watcher, in retrospect. The reality that he had the power to compel others didn't really sink in until after his conversation with Jude. Disconcerting though it was, he couldn't deny the part of him that *liked* it - that ability to ask a question and receive an answer that he could know without a doubt was true. Eventually the discomfort and shame overshadowed the satisfaction, but in those early days, he appreciated that power to an extent.

Jon notices belatedly that the other two are watching him expectantly. He hadn't planned on playing Daisy's tape first, but since he already has it prepared to go, he fast-forwards to the beginning of her statement and lets it play through to the end. No one makes any comment in the few seconds it takes for him to swap the cassette out for Joshua Gillespie's statement.

"So the Coffin makes people want to enter it," Basira says as the second statement ends. "Is that why you went in, the first time? You were compelled?"

Jon shakes his head *no.* Daisy had asked him the same question last time. It's true that the Coffin called to him, but its compulsion never got beneath his skin – not like that of the Beholding or the Web. In the end, going into the Buried was his decision.

“Why, then?”

“…survivor’s guilt,” Jon says. *“I should be dead, really – it’s hard to reconcile yourself with avoiding a death that you feel should have been yours.”*

There was more to it, though. He takes a minute to rifle through statements, to piece together his state of mind the first time he entered the Buried.

“I felt a great deal of guilt over my involvement with–”

“–the path of the Eye–”

“–when they looked at me, their eyes were full of – anger – blame–”

“–looked at me with a mixture of hate and helpless terror, as though I could do something to fix it–”

“–cut off effectively all human contact–”

“–I decided I had to do something – anything to get out of the fog–”

“–to lose myself in something that is not the absence of humanity–”

“–desperate to remind myself that I could still feel something–”

“–desperate for any human connection.”

He pauses for a breath. Looking back, if Jon hadn’t been so thoroughly claimed by the Beholding already, he may have been a candidate for the Lonely himself back then. Peter Lukas didn’t have to lift a finger.

“I was starting to fear that if I didn’t manage to do something–”

“–I would lose myself – forever–”

“–I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t at least try–”

“–it was – the most human part of it remaining–”

"–to act, to help, to do something–"

"–I need to not lose any more bits of me–"

"–and worst comes to worst–"

"–at least I felt useful."

Georgie's eyes are on him now, reading between the lines.

"Did you even have a plan? Or did you just… rush in by yourself, not even tell anyone?" He nods. "Which?" He gives Georgie a pointed look, nodding a second time. "Both? Figures. Don't know why I bothered asking."

"…but this time was different," he assures her.

"How did you get out?" Basira asks.

"It took all my self-control to keep a grip on that anchor."

"Meaning?"

"…her anchor. The thing weighing her down, tying her to this world," he tries again.

"Something to ground you," Georgie says questioningly.

"…to make finding my way back – that much easier."

"And you can do the same thing this time?" Basira waits for his confirmation before moving on. "What about the delivery itself?"

Jon pulls out another folder and cassette, both labeled *CASE #9961505.*

"Statement of Alfred Breekon, regarding a new pair of workers at his delivery company."

"Breekon and Hope?" Basira asks.

Jon nods, inserts the tape, and depresses the play button.

"They've been in a few statements, haven't they?" Basira says afterwards, forehead creased in thought.

As an answer, Jon removes one last cassette from the box before tilting it forward to reveal a handful of case files sliding around at the bottom. All of them contain minor references either to Breekon and Hope or the Coffin, but none of them struck him as significant enough to bother bringing the accompanying tapes.

The remaining cassette in his hand, label reading *CASE #0020406,* is only relevant for the last minute or so of the recording: Martin's encounter with Breekon and Hope on the day they delivered the NotThem's table and the Web's lighter. Jon pops it into the recorder, skips to the relevant timestamp, and hits play. Breekon and Hope's voices echo in the tunnel, finishing each other's sentences in an uncanny back-and-forth volley.

"Hm." Basira frowns. "And they just… got into the Archives without anyone seeing them?" Jon nods. "I'm assuming we can expect the same this time?" Another nod, but Jon holds up two fingers, gives Basira a meaningful look, and then puts one down. "Only one of them."

"Statement of the surviving half of the being calling itself 'Breekon and Hope,'" Jon says. Then: *"When that Hunter killed him – took him from me, made us a me – the casket – was waiting – I fed her to it."*

“Do we have to worry about a fight?”

Jon shakes his head *no. “We did not kill them, did not lift a finger. We were bringers of their awful fate, not its executors – and we both tasted it together.”* He fast-forwards the statement in his head. *“I am without him now – can feel myself fading, weak, no reason to move, nothing to deliver. But I am no longer tied to the casket, so you can have it – climb in, and join her.”*

“So we just, what, let it deliver the thing and leave?”

“I told her that any real danger had passed–”

“–fading, weak, no reason to move, nothing to deliver.”

“And then you go in.”

Jon nods. There are more details, of course, but the basics of his plan are the same as they were last time: equip himself with Daisy’s tape, follow the pull of her voice, rely on his anchor to find the way back – hopefully with fewer hiccups this time.

Or fewer lost ribs, at least, now that he has a better grasp on anchors.

Several days later, a visitor arrives in the Archives, albeit not the one they’ve been expecting.

Head pillowed in his arms on his desk, dozing and half-conscious, Jon is roused from a shallow sleep by voices in the hallway, filtering through the open crack in the door.

“This area is off-limits,” Basira is saying.

“I’m just looking for the Head Archivist. Jonathan Sims? He still works here, doesn’t he?”

Is that…

“What do you want with Jon?” Georgie’s voice, sounding genuinely curious, but anyone familiar with her would recognize the protective edge to it.

“Look, is he here or isn’t he?”

It is.

Rubbing bleary eyes and shaking off the remaining wisps of brain fog, Jon stands, his joints cracking in protest. He grabs his cane, heads for the door, and peeks out into the hallway.

Naomi Herne is here, standing in the doorway at the bottom of the stairs between the Archives and the rest of the Institute. She looked his way when she heard the creak of the door opening, and their eyes meet for a brief moment before he reflexively averts his gaze.

“Jon?” She sidesteps Basira and Georgie and starts walking towards him.

He digs in his pockets and brings out his phone. So far, the AAC app has turned out to be a decent workaround. Prolonged use will still give him a headache in much the same way that communicating through illustration does, but it’s helpful for making specific requests, asking direct questions, and conveying simple or general concepts. He’ll accept a headache if it means not being forced to use some convoluted metaphor just to say *I don’t know* or *I’m short-circuiting, please give me some space* or *I’m going to make tea; would you like some?*

“YOU ARE – HERE,” comes the computerized voice as he prods at the screen. “WHY.”

For a long moment, Naomi says nothing, staring at the phone in his hand.

"It's been over a week since I last saw you," she says slowly. "At first I thought it must be because you woke up – which was a good guess, apparently – but then days went by and no dreams, and… I was worried." Jon tilts his head, confused. "What's with that look?"

Jon opens and closes his mouth a few times, debating on whether to reach for a statement. It feels wrong to be dishonest with her, and a hopeful part of him suggests that Naomi wouldn't react too badly. She's seen worse from him, and none of that seems to have scared her away, so…

"…I wasn't worth worrying about."

Naomi rolls her eyes. "Why are you so stubborn?"

Georgie laughs at that. When Naomi glances in her direction, she starts approaching the two of them, seemingly satisfied that Naomi isn't a threat. Likewise, Basira drifts off down the hall and into the break room. She leaves the door open, though – Jon Knows she still wants to listen in, just in case.

"He's always been like this," Georgie says.

"Figures," Naomi says, then looks back at Jon. "So, why haven't you been around? Did you find a way to sever the dreams, or…?" Jon shakes his head *no.* "Then what?"

"It's not like I sleep enough to worry about dreams," he says evasively.

Naomi opens her mouth to reply and at that moment Jon's phone goes off. He nearly drops the thing as he fumbles to dismiss the alarm. Once the noise is silenced, Jon sighs and looks at Georgie.

“You want me to…?” Jon nods, giving her permission to speak on his behalf. “Okay then.”

Georgie looks at Naomi.

“Jonathan” – Jon huffs at the use of his full name – “has been depriving himself of sleep. But no matter how stubborn he is, *he’s still human.”* Georgie gives him a stern look, daring him to contradict her. He doesn’t; it isn’t worth getting into this discussion, especially in front of Naomi. “Now he’s started nodding off in spite of himself, he’s been forced to admit that he can’t go without sleep forever – but instead of actually *sleeping*, he’s decided that the best course of action is to just set alarms at forty-five minute intervals, to wake him up before he enters REM sleep. Which means he’s not getting any restful sleep.” She looks at Jon and smiles disarmingly. “Does that about cover it?”

Jon rolls his eyes – she really didn’t need to offer the detail about his new alarm routine – but he nods all the same.

“And why don’t you want to sleep?” Naomi asks.

“The only thing that worried me was sleeping. I think it gave me bad dreams,” he says.

“Not to be rude, but…” Naomi hesitates before blurting out: “Why are you talking like that?”

“He’s been having… some speech difficulties,” Georgie says, glancing at Jon. He makes a circular motion with one hand: *It’s fine; go ahead.* “Ever since he woke up, he’s only able to speak in quotes from the statements? It’s… challenging, to say the least.”

“Ah,” Naomi says, chipper, “just some new spooky developments, then.”

Out of habit, Jon glares at her for her word choice, but there’s no real ire in it. If anything, it’s a relief to find that Naomi’s attitude toward him seems unchanged despite said new spooky developments.

“But…” Naomi frowns. “You’ve been having these dreams for two years now, and you said you’ve mostly gotten them sorted. So how is sleeping now any different from the last few months?”

“He’s afraid that things will go back to the way they were before.”

“O…kay,” Naomi says slowly, “but you told me that most of the others have already learned to stop the nightmare sequence without you. And everyone knows now that you aren’t as scary as you look – which, by the way, is it weird that now it's almost more unsettling to see you with only two eyes? Sorry, not the point. The point is, it *won’t* be the same as it was before.”

Jon stares fixedly at a scratch on the floor. Left over from the Flesh attack, maybe? He could Know, but–

Focus, he tells himself before his thoughts can wander too far afield.

He isn’t sure how to explain that the other dreamers may not be as forgiving or fearless as Naomi is. And even if they *were* to find it in themselves to overlook a relapse, even if they *don’t* start viewing him the way they did before… the prospect of having his bodily autonomy stripped from him again is more than enough to fill him with dread.

It feels too much like the way the hunger pulls him inexorably toward a victim. It will probably feel like how it does when the Archive takes control. It will *definitely* feel like it did when he was made a conduit for the Watcher’s Crown. Jonah wearing him like a glove. Locking him in place, forcing his eyes open, hijacking his voice. Making him into a possession, only to cast him aside like a broken toy once he had served his purpose.

“–Jon?”

With some effort, he drags himself back to the present.

"Something not moving but that wants to move. Wants to be free–"

"–stopped being able to move under his own power – walk him like a puppet – directed and controlled–"

"–unable to move – to cry for help."

Hands shaking, he inputs a response on his phone.

"I AM – SCARED."

"That's… okay, that sounds properly horrifying," Naomi admits. "But you don't know for sure that's what'll happen, right?" Grudgingly, Jon shakes his head *no.* "So you could be fretting over nothing."

"So far, so normal, right?"

"Smartass," Naomi says, but with good humor. "Still, you can't go without sleep forever – you're going to have to face it eventually. You may as well get it over with sooner rather than later, and then you'll know for sure. If nothing else, you'll get some sleep out of it. *But,"* she says with a longsuffering sigh, "I have a feeling you're going to keep pushing it, so…" She holds out her hand and crooks her fingers. "Phone. I'm adding my number to your contacts."

It isn't until Jon hands it over that he even consciously processes her words.

"Just so you know," Georgie says, "he can't really text, either. Unless it's in statements."

"That's fine," Naomi says, typing rapidly. "You can just reply with emojis or whatever, Jon. Just something to let me know you're still alive." She hands the phone back to him. "And this way I can send you pictures of the Duchess."

Jon perks up at that.

“The Duchess?” Georgie asks.

“Yep. Adopted a cat last week.” Naomi’s smile is wider than Jon has ever seen it. “She’s settling in nicely,” she says to him before looking back to Georgie. “I almost changed her name, but Jon insisted I leave it as is. Said I shouldn’t deprive her of a title she’d rightfully earned.”

Georgie snorts. “He said the same about the Admiral.”

“Oh, you must be Georgie, then? I’ve heard a lot about… uh–”

“Don’t worry; I’m well aware you’ve heard more about the Admiral than me. Pretty sure Jon prefers his company to mine half the time.” She ignores the indignant look Jon shoots her and holds out her phone to Naomi. “Jon was notoriously terrible at answering texts even before all of… this. Feel free to direct any, ‘Is Jonathan Sims still alive?’ queries to me.”

Jon watches in bewilderment as the two of them exchange numbers. Not for the first time, he wonders how this kind of thing seems to come so *naturally* to other people.

“I also wouldn’t mind seeing a photo of the Duchess.”

“What about a group chat?” Naomi says. “Spooky-free zone, cat-related updates only. Everyone gets their daily dose of cat antics, I get to honestly tell my therapist that I’m not self-isolating, and Jon can just like things to let me know he’s still breathing. Three birds, one stone.”

“Good idea.” Georgie gives Jon an exacting look. “It’ll give you something *nice* to obsess over. I’ll ask Melanie if she wants to be added, too. She could use the distraction.”

Jon can feel a smile tug at his lips as he hurriedly taps out a response.

"YES – PLEASE – THANK YOU."

Jon and the others try to retreat to the tunnels as often as possible – every other day, if they can manage it – even if there isn't a pressing matter to discuss. More than anything, it's a ploy to throw off Jonah. There's every possibility that he would grow suspicious if the group only held their secretive meetings just prior to major events. Meeting frequently likely won't alarm him too much, though. Jonah is likely to write off Jon's furtiveness as paranoia, or simply his near-compulsive tendency to retread the same ground in aimless circles, obsessing over a single question *ad infinitum*.

Jon isn't sure whether he Knows this, or if he's just become uncomfortably familiar with Jonah's thought processes. Either way, Jon is well aware of what Jonah thinks of him, of how the man can effortlessly dissect and predict Jon's every outward action and inner experience. If he's honest with himself, Jonah's scrutiny may terrify him even more than the Ceaseless Watcher's.

At least the Eye is alien, operating entirely outside the bounds of human morality and emotion. It and all of the other Fears just… *are* what they are. Predictable, instinctual, amoral – or operating on a sort of blue-and-orange morality, at least. It brings to mind something Michael said to him, all those years ago: *Am I evil, Archivist? Is a thing evil when it simply obeys its own nature? When it* embodies *its nature? When that nature is created by those which revile it?*

Someone like Jonah Magnus, though – born human, raised human, spending several lifetimes embedded in human society – can understand his fellow humans much more intimately than any nonhuman Entity ever could, and he uses that understanding to torture his victims, knowing full well how it *feels.* On the one hand, Jon and all his other pawns throughout the centuries are nothing but means to an end; he cares little for them outside of their usefulness to him. On the other hand, he isn't fully detached: there's no denying the sadistic glee he took in gloating as he forced Jon to open the door.

Even in a world devoid of the Dread Powers, monsters would still exist, and a mundane human monstrosity is almost as dreadful as a supernatural one. Daisy derived joy from the Hunt with more complexity than a wolf would. Jon's own hunts may have felt instinctual, but they also felt morally wrong in a way that tearing the legs off a spider would never feel to a cat – and he did it anyway. Even Gertrude embodied a certain flavor of monstrosity, despite never fully giving in to the temptation of the Beholding. She did not need to embrace any supernatural power; her ruthlessness damned innocent people all the same, as thoroughly as the Desolation and with as much precision as the Web.

Georgie and Martin – and Helen, even – may have a point about humanity and monstrosity not following a strict either/or dichotomy. Whether the Fears were birthed by humanity or preceded it, in the world as-is they would be toothless without human imagination to fuel and interpret and inspire them. The apocalypse demonstrated that fact rather starkly the more and more the human population dwindled.

Jon shakes his head, interrupting that line of thought. There are more important things to worry about right now. Namely: it's the third of March, and the Institute is due a visitor.

Basira is with him in his office; Georgie is off keeping Melanie company, away from Breekon and any possibility of a confrontation. They agreed to this arrangement last night in the tunnels, and since they've been having those clandestine meetings so regularly, it should look like a coincidence to Jonah, rather than a prearranged setup.

Breekon arrives right on schedule, though this time he cannot catch Basira alone. He comes directly to Jon's office, dragging the Coffin behind him.

"Jon," Basira says urgently, not taking her eyes off the hulking figure darkening the doorway.

They must tread carefully – not seeming so unconcerned as to let on that they were expecting the delivery, but not overselling the act so much that Jonah would sense something was amiss.

"I wish I could say that was the last I saw of them – but they did return – started to make deliveries – Breekon and Hope."

“Where’s the other one?” Basira asks.

“That copper took him from me,” Breekon says balefully. He drags the Coffin over the threshold, lets it fall to the ground with a thump, and jerks his head at it. “So I fed it to the pit.”

“Daisy’s in there,” Basira says, bristling.

“That’s its name? Then sure, ‘t’s in there, whatever’s *left.* Find out if you like.”

“...get out of my office–”

Jon’s voice crackles with static, and Breekon takes one step backward.

“What are you doing? Stop that.”

“Jon,” Basira says warningly.

“–as soon as they’d placed the box on the floor, they turned around and walked out–”

The static continues to rise in volume.

“I said *stop it!”* Breekon grunts through gritted teeth, even as he turns and steps back over the threshold.

“–the door slammed behind them” – Breekon does indeed reach for the handle and pull the door shut after him – *“and I was left – with this package.”*

The static cuts out abruptly, and Jon exhales heavily, winded.

"What the hell was that?" Basira demands, rounding on Jon. "Did you just – *compel* him to leave?"

"…apparently this was how it was done now," Jon says quietly. That at least answers the question of whether he can still effectively use that power. He isn't sure how to feel about that.

"Knew you could compel people to answer questions. Didn't know you could compel actions, too."

Jon shuts his eyes, still catching his breath. There were limits on his compulsion abilities even during the apocalypse; there are bound to be just as many now, if not more. He doesn't have the mindset for muddling through a complicated explanation right now, though, so he opts for the AAC app instead.

"LITTLE," he selects from the screen. It should be enough to get the general point across, at least for now.

"Great. I'll just put that in the *ominous* column, shall I?" Basira sighs. "Is it really okay to just… let him leave?"

"I told her that any real danger had passed," he says simply.

"If you say so." She stares intently at the Coffin, arms crossed. "So, what now?"

Without another word, Jon stands and beckons for Basira to follow. As he locks the office door behind them, Basira tells him to go wait for her at the tunnel entrance while she fetches Melanie and Georgie. He nods absentmindedly, but she's already left without waiting for a response.

The last time, two weeks spanned between the delivery of the Coffin and the day Jon actually opened it. This time, there's no need to wait. He still has some preparations to make – there's no need to visit the Boneturner, but Jon does still want to leave some tapes running to serve as physical anchors. He also has to plan for the possibility of something going wrong, even if he is fairly confident in his ability to find his way back again. Mainly, he'd like to leave a letter behind for Martin, though the Archive might make that difficult.

Other than that, it's just a matter of mentally preparing himself for another trip into the Buried.

Knowing what to expect doesn't make it any less terrifying. If anything, it might make it worse.

Chapter End Notes

- Soooo I thought I'd be able to cover more plot in this chapter, but I was too attached to the scene with Naomi to scrap it, and I wanted that conversation between Jon and Georgie to happen pre-Buried. The result is that this chapter feels a bit scattershot. But that means next chapter I can just focus on the Coffin. Thanks for bearing with me! (Hoping to have next chapter ready by this weekend or early next week. Depends on how busy work is.)

- For anyone unfamiliar with AAC (augmentative and alternative communication) devices/apps and wondering why it's different from typing/texting for Jon - the app he's using has preloaded phrases and images he can select from, so he doesn't have to type/text character-by-character. It still has drawbacks for him - difficult to use for long periods of time, less likely to work the more specific he tries to be, like with drawing - but at least there's another communication option for him to reach for now.

- Citations for Jon's verbal dialogue are as follows, broken down by section.
Section 1: None.
Section 2: 009; 036; 050/027/008/153/010/015/009/124/056/128; 112; 045/005/112/131; 045; 020/134; 157; 017; 138/130; 059; 029; 101/024; 135; 094; both 028 & 076; 148; 094; 042; 054; 117/013; 013/009; 150; 013/009/013/007/013; 146/092/151/063; 002/050; 009; 062.
Section 3: 038.
Section 4: 002; 061; 050; 056; 051; 019/138/013/105/113/013/092/122/102; 019/048/011/123/124/014/145/139; 051; 013, 145; 023; 096; 128; 128 (again); 008/128.

Section 5: 014; 113; 002; 032/136/015; 025.
Section 6: 096; 006; 002; 002 (again); 005; 008.

- The taped banter between Daisy and Jon is from MAG 061. The Michael quote is from MAG 101. A few bits of Breekon's dialogue were borrowed from MAG 128.

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

Reaching Out

Chapter Summary

In which Jon prepares to confront the Buried. *Again.*

Chapter Notes

Or: Local Bi/Ace Disaster Yeets Self Into A(nother) Pit; More At 11.

CWs for Chapter 11: swearing; mild self-harm (brief instance of wrist banging/bruising to distract from intrusive thoughts; mention of scratching/skin picking); some Buried-related claustrophobic memories; mentions of Jon starving himself (wrt to consuming statements, but worth mentioning for anyone who needs content warnings related to eating disorders, restrictive diets, etc.; there will be more going forward of Jon being hungry and restricting himself, and I'll keep warning for it, especially in chapters where it features heavily).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The tunnels are as ominous as they've always been, but at this point, Jon just might be growing accustomed to them. The creeping fear he's always felt down here has faded to the background – an ambient sense of dread. It's almost tolerable, or at least less oppressive than the omnipresent sense of being watched that he's long since accepted as his normal.

Here, he can compose his letter to Martin without the risk of Jonah Seeing exactly what Jon's eyes see.

After the Watcher's Crown, Jonah did not Watch through Jon's eyes anymore. Whether that was because Jon was stronger than Jonah at that point or because Jonah did not bother to try, Jon doesn't Know. Once the ritual was completed, Jonah no longer had any stake in Jon's trajectory, had no need to monitor his progress or ensure his survival. Moreover, Jonah's inflated ego never allowed for the possibility that Jon could pose a threat to his reign. His Archivist – his *Archive* – had no further interest to him except as a source of entertainment, and he didn't need to See through Jon's eyes in order to behold the show. He could See all of creation from the Panopticon.

Jon is stronger now than he was the last time he was here, but he's still nowhere near as powerful as he was during the apocalypse. He's tried to Know how he measures up against Jonah now, but the Beholding seems intent on withholding that knowledge from him. Last time he made an attempt, the Eye treated him to a litany of trivia about the interactions between the human body and the venom of various species of spider.

Sometimes Jon thinks that if the Beholding *is* sentient, it might just be the pettiest of the Dread Powers.

In any case, Jonah Magnus is as much of a gnawing question mark as he's always been. It's safest to assume that he has the advantage until proven otherwise – and Jon will take the tunnels over Jonah's voyeurism any day, no matter how harrowing they may be. Even if he has to be down here alone – which he is.

Georgie is with Melanie, and Jon is reluctant to ask Basira for any favors right now. He wonders again if this is how Martin felt, living in the Archives, spending sleepless nights with himself and the scratching of a pen as his only companions. Just like Jon, Martin was never very good company for himself, especially back then – and back *now.* He was primed for the Lonely long before he started working at the Institute.

Speaking of which…

Jon sighs, puts his pen down, and begins to read through what he's written.

I'm sorry I left you.

...now I'm here, trying to explain things–

–had changed since he left–

–it seemed he was alone–

–as far as I could tell, all alone in the world, and rather unhappy about the fact.

I will admit to taking a dislike to the man when I first met him – but–

–I'd say that – was a foolish act of past me.

Jon is worried about starting the letter like this, but this is a point in time not too far removed from his early mistreatment of Martin. Jon had made his apologies and explanations at length in his future, but *this* version of Martin hasn't experienced that yet. Jon can't just jump into showing affection before taking accountability for his past behavior – *recent* past, from the perspective of this timeline.

He can only hope that Martin will read through to the end, and that Jon's intention – his sincerity – will be understood.

Soon I was giving my account as a full confession–

–trying my best to fit this into a relatively coherent narrative.

It's plenty of things I've done I couldn't explain to you. I mean, I'm constantly – looking back at my past self and thinking, what an idiot. How the hell could he have done such an obviously stupid thing? How was I surprised it went so badly? What a relief I'm now so much older and wiser.

I've never really been the social type – I've always just been happier alone. Well, maybe happier isn't quite the right word. I did get a bit lonely sometimes. I'd hear laughter coming from other rooms in my building, or see a group of friends talking in the sun outside, and maybe I'd wish I had something like that, but it never really bothered me – I didn't need another people and they certainly didn't need me.

Jon looks down at the words with a dissatisfied scowl. Does this come off as too self-centered? As more of an excuse than an explanation? This would be so much easier if he could just *say what he means.* Then again, Jon's always struggled with discussing emotional matter. He can't blame it *all* on the Archive.

These thoughts, these feelings were always in my mind – until – I realized the deeper truth of it all.

I tried to put it into words, but without any real success. Even here, with the time to compose it properly, I'm not sure I've caught the essence of what I felt–

–I had a look through my library, and couldn't find anything that matched it–

–those are musings for poets, among whom I do not number–

–it's all very well to say 'write down what you saw,' but what if you don't have the words?

I suppose I'll just have to try.

I've always been more comfortable alone–

–had few friends – reluctant to make the sort of connections that might lead to–

–the prospect of being genuinely loved–

–fully and completely known–

–having people be genuinely lovely to me, I didn't know what to do with those feelings–

–I could never bring myself to try. It felt more comfortable, more familiar, to be alone.

It is the fear of being watched, and judged, and having all your secrets known.

Ironic, in some ways–

–being what I am–

–an Archivist pleading for knowledge–

–to feed the sick voyeur that lurks in this place.

Eventually, I opened my eyes–

–feeling absurd about how terrified I was about being seen–

–kicking myself for having been so stupid–

–it wasn't natural for people to live in isolation – we were creatures of community by nature.

Soon enough, I could no longer fool myself–

–the man I loved–

who was by all accounts such a kind and gentle soul–

–when I – saw him standing there waiting for me – I don't think I've ever been happier than in that moment.

He spoke words I thought existed only in my heart, and I loved him as the soil loves the rain–

–and it seemed he felt the same way–

–and together it seemed like we would get past our pain.

Everything about being with him felt so natural that when he told me he loved me, it only came as a surprise to realize that we hadn't said it already.

…to say – "I love you" – honestly it's one of the few decisions I've ever made that I completely understand.

It's… woefully inadequate. Too devoid of context. Unlikely to reach Martin through the fog. But maybe it will be enough to convince him to at least *talk* to Jon. To keep the Lonely at bay, at least for now.

After leaving the hospital, the next thing that is properly clear in my mind is–

–I need him to be okay.

I couldn't see him or hear him–

–I didn't even get a chance to speak to him – asked what had happened, he was just gone. And I was alone again.

I wanted to say something reassuring, to reach out and let him know I was still there–

–I wanted to act, to help, to do something, but – I felt helpless to do anything but watch as events progressed.

I think he might be part of something really awful, and I don't know how to make him see that – of course I did worry. I knew that, secretly, he was as well.

I know how that sounds – but – I ask you to read on.

For a split second, the memory of the ritual flits through his mind – *Apologies for the deception, but I wanted to make sure you started reading …* – and Jon brings his wrist down on the side of his chair, *hard.* The pain jolts him out of the recollection and brings him back to the present. He watches halfheartedly as the discoloration fades before his eyes, frustration with his overreaction itching in the back of his mind. *Stupid.*

With a longsuffering sigh, he rereads the previous section again. The borrowed words sound patronizing, without the qualifying context he wishes he could provide more explicitly. He isn't just nitpicking – it's crucial that Martin knows that Jon *isn't* underestimating him, despite a history of doing exactly that for far too long.

The first time around, he trusted Martin – more than he trusted anyone, including (perhaps especially) himself – and even knowing what he knows now, he doesn't regret it. He heard the tapes.

"But if I could just explain," Martin had said.

"And how do you think Jon's going to react to that explanation, hm?" Peter had replied. *"You think he'll accept it calmly? Come through with a well-considered, rational response?"*

"That's not fair."

"Or would he assume he knows better than you and do something rash?"

"I don't like being manipulated."

"That's fair. But I'm not wrong."

"No."

In Jon's original timeline, he *had* proven Peter wrong. He had trusted Martin, respected his boundaries, followed his lead. This time, though… Jon won't be able to demonstrate that with non-interference, and not being able to *use his own words* doesn't help him explain that this *isn't* just another instance of Jon just assuming he knows better than everyone else, that he actually *does* have special knowledge, and – truthfulness aside, that sounds condescending, too, doesn't it?

He doesn't blame Martin for agreeing with Peter. For a significant portion of Jon's life, it would have been a fair assessment. He *didn't* trust people. He didn't trust himself, either – not *really* – but at least he knew his own intentions. That bone-deep fear of being manipulated, of being rejected, of not having control… it never played well with the concept of *trust.*

And when they first started working together, Jon made no secret of his knee-jerk judgment of Martin as being incompetent, clumsy, and unreliable. In retrospect, he couldn't have been more wrong. He knows now that he was only seeing what he wanted to see, projecting his own insecurities and fear of failure onto Martin to distract from his own floundering.

After learning that Martin had lied on his CV, Jon readjusted his initial opinions. He was *impressed.* Martin was remarkably capable for someone with no prior qualifications, no experience, no degree. What he lacked in experience he more than made up for in effort. He was clever, and resolute, and dependable, and genuine, and… and *god,* wasn't Jon a fool for taking so long to notice? And then for never saying as much until it was almost too late?

This version of Martin hasn't heard that apology just yet – or the corollary apology for waiting so long to apologize. Georgie told Jon years ago that he needed to use his words, that sometimes people needed to hear explicitly that they were acknowledged and appreciated. Just because Jon had low tolerance for receiving direct praise – despite craving it deeply – didn't mean that other people had the same hangups.

He's since taken that advice to heart, but he should have done sooner. Georgie had been right about a lot of things.

Jon did eventually say as much and more, during those brief few weeks they had in the safehouse. Peter hadn't been all wrong when he questioned how much they *really* knew one another. Between Jon's early irascibility and the distance he felt obligated to keep given their employee/boss relationship; between preventing apocalypses and being in such constant life-or-death peril that it started to feel *normal,* so normal that Jon didn't know what to do with himself when he *wasn't* being chased or held captive; between the coma, and descending into inhumanity, and the Lonely… they *hadn't* had a chance to get to know each other outside of a crisis situation.

Jon didn't even know *himself* anymore. He wondered if he ever had.

For the first time, they finally had the time and space to remedy that. Both of them were changed and would never be the same, but they had each other. They were both willing to put in the effort, to learn how to communicate and accommodate and navigate boundaries, despite neither having much experience with healthy relationships. And for a little while, it had seemed that they could both learn how to be present in the world again – starting with their own microcosm, one day at a time, encouraging one another to be more patient and kind with themselves.

It wasn't *fair*, how abruptly that hesitant, hopeful attempt was stolen from them. Jon didn't feel like he deserved comfort and contentment – he still doesn't – but Martin… Martin deserved – *deserves* – to be safe and cared for and loved. Martin deserves to be *happy*.

Jon desperately wants to help him See that.

Don't… misunderstand me, please–

–I trusted his instincts almost as much as I trusted my own.

More than I trusted my own, Jon amends in his head – but the Archive isn't cooperating.

But I knew that I – knew the future–

–the promise of secret knowledge, of seeing something that no one else was privy to–

–there was – a lot – we were missing.

Please. All I ask is that I be allowed–

–a chance to express myself–

–said something about knowledge being a good defense here–

–so here I am, pouring out my lunatic story on paper in the hopes that you might eventually read it.

Statement of Georgina Barker regarding–

–travel through time.

Jon still has to ask Georgie if she can explain the situation to Martin, but he doesn't think she'll mind. It won't be as comprehensive as Jon wishes it could be – he still struggles with explaining the fine details of the apocalypse to the others given his current limitations – but he's done his best, and he can trust Georgie to do the same.

Some fears can only be endured for so long. I remember every second of that fall. Like it was happening in slow motion. I was certain I was about to watch him fall like I had.

That knowledge I had gained – could finally be put to use.

I shall do my best to explain, and hope that any revelations contained here in me sway you from the path you have started upon.

I wanted to tell him to stop, to warn him – because I knew–

–the Extinction – while I have seen evidence of its influence in other powers–

–there was no sign of – imminent arrival – I resolved–

–its emergence as a true power of its own–

–wasn't a threat.

Whatever he was planning–

–to try and rescue those trapped–

–trying to protect me–

–defending the world from the darkness…

…I know – to talk to other people about it–

–desperately wishing for another human being to talk to–

–to take too much comfort in – people – would go quite strongly against the spirit of the experiment – had to really feel alone. That at least didn't take too long to set in.

All that remained was the fog – could wander there for years, and never meet another – utterly forsaken – there seemed to be no end to it.

But it didn't need to be forever, did it?

"This too shall pass."

I tried to explain but all I could manage to get through the shaking sobs was, "I love you."

By then it looked like he was on the verge of tears,

Jon stops reading for a moment, realizing that, aptly enough, *he's* on the verge of tears right now. He swallows them back and continues.

By then it looked like he was on the verge of tears, but I couldn't leave it alone – just couldn't let it go.

I have tried to write it down, to put it into terms and words you could understand. And now I stare at it and not a word of it is even enough to fully describe the fact that–

I cannot lose him.

I – cared deeply about his well-being.

I know he didn't deserve what happened to him.

He deserved to–

–to be – beloved–

–cared for – trusted–

–being wanted and appreciated–

–being genuinely loved–

–no matter how wrong it might feel–

–when you're at your lowest point, when you're your most emotionally vulnerable.

I need him to be okay–

–and the world is so much better for–

–the easy, charming man I'd fall in love with–

–being in it.

Please. All I ask is that I be allowed to–

–talk to you, before it all comes to an end–

–and I swear to you that–

–if you decide to do it – if–

–you want to be alone – and–

–didn't say much to me after that–

–I made sure to keep – distance.

There's so much more Jon wishes he could say; so much that he wishes he could say in his *own* voice, rather than the stolen words of survivors recounting the most traumatic moments of their lives. It feels perverse, to use their statements like this. It might not be as bad as feeding directly on a victim, but it still falls on a spectrum of appropriating the torment of others for his own use.

At the end of the day, it really doesn't feel all that different from Jonah's brand of dehumanization. It's just one more way Jon is complicit in the evil that thrives in this place–

"Hey," comes Georgie's voice from just a short distance away. Jon startles, sending his pen clattering to the floor. He had been so lost in his own thoughts, he hadn't even heard her descending the ladder. "Sorry," she says with a wince. "Didn't mean to scare you."

Retrieving the fallen pen, Jon waves the apology off – *it's okay* – and Georgie comes to sit next to him.

"Finished with your letter?"

"...I'm vague on the details," he says. *"I have to be."*

"Want me to take a look?"

Jon nods; he had been planning on asking her to read it through. Even if it was in his own words, he would likely run it by her. He trusts Georgie's judgment regarding relationship matters far more than he trusts his own, and he knows she'll be straightforward with him if he's said something… well, *stupid.* He's gotten better at communicating, but that doesn't mean his tendency to put his foot in his mouth has disappeared entirely.

He jiggles his leg restlessly as she reads, increasingly self-conscious the longer the silence goes on. He resists scratching at his hands – Georgie is sure to reprimand him if he starts that up again. It isn't that she has a problem with his fidgeting; she was actually one of the first people in his life to tolerate it. Encourage it, even. She pointed out quite bluntly once that whenever Jon tried to force himself to sit still, his restless energy didn't *go away,* it just came out as waspishness instead.

But she had a rule: no self-harm, no matter how mild. Personally, he didn't categorize the scratching as *self-harm*, but she was firm about it. Lately, the scratching is limited mostly to his burned hand, and he's tried explaining to her that it doesn't even hurt – the scar tissue doesn't register much sensation anymore – but she won't hear it. For the past couple weeks, whenever she catches him at it, she gives him a *look* until he stops.

"I think it's good," Georgie says. "But…"

Jon tenses, but then he glimpses Georgie's playful grin.

"It's nothing bad! It's just… well…"

He can hear the spark of mischief in her tone and somehow that makes him more apprehensive than the prospect of criticism.

"See, you say you're not a poet," she says, pointing at the letter, "but this part here…"

> *He spoke words I thought existed only in my heart, and I loved him as the soil loves the rain–*
>
> *–and it seemed he felt the same way–*

–and together it seemed like we would get past our pain.

"You go and use a sappy metaphor – and I know," she says, seeing him ready to protest, "they're not *your* words and you're using what you have available."

Yes, he wants to say, *and my vast library comprised solely of people's retellings of their supernatural trauma isn't exactly forthcoming with declarations of love, Georgina.*

"But," she says, goading now, "then you go and *rhyme* the first and last lines."

Jon squints at the letter, and…

Fuck. It *does* rhyme.

When he moves to snatch the paper away, Georgie swiftly stands and holds it out of reach, dancing backwards.

"No, nope, absolutely not," she says, laughing. "Jonathan Sims, I refuse to let you change it. You're leaving it *exactly* as is."

"…being used against me in a cruel joke," he huffs, glowering at her – but her laugh has always been infectious, and he can't fight it as his lips twitch into a smile.

She hands the letter back to him after a minute, still grinning when she takes her seat again.

"I'm teasing you. You can change it if you want, but I think it's adorable and you should leave it. Besides, Martin's a poet, isn't he? He might get a kick out of it."

Honestly, it doesn't bother Jon enough to rewrite the entire thing. And if there's a chance of it coaxing a smile out of Martin…

"On a more serious note – this part here, 'statement of Georgina Barker' – I'm assuming you want me to try to convince him that you actually *are* a time traveler here to stop the apocalypse?" Jon nods. "Probably easier than trying to write it all out. I don't mind, but are you sure he'll listen to me?"

Jon shrugs. He has the same worry, but…

"As for myself, I must cling to–"

"–that most insidious of emotions: hope."

"Somehow both unexpectedly sappy *and* predictably ominous," she replies, "but I'll take it. Better than brooding, anyway."

Despite the light teasing, the smile she flashes is genuine. Fleeting, though, as she continues.

"Oh, one more thing – that one bit, capital-E Extinction? One, *don't* like the sound of that, and two – should I know what that is? Melanie hasn't mentioned anything like that before."

"I'm sorry – it won't let me say the words," Jon says with a frustrated sigh.

"Will Martin know what it means, though?" Jon nods. With any luck, Martin can be persuaded to fill the others in on it. "Good enough."

She watches him for a few moments as he chews at his thumbnail, leg still shaking, staring at the floor.

"Something's on your mind."

Jon sighs and closes his eyes.

"I could feel hunger gnawing at me."

"You *still* haven't had a statement?" Georgie says, frowning at him.

"Something he could salvage from the whole situation," he mutters, not looking up at her. *"Just a way of getting some control over his life, you know?"*

"Jon, you can't just starve yourself–"

"Running was pointless," he agrees sullenly. *"To try to escape from my task would only serve to fulfill another. I finally understood what I needed to do–"*

"–some hungers are too strong to be denied–"

"–you have to feed it – or it will feed on you."

"So why haven't you?"

"Even as I did so, in the back of my mind I hated myself–"

"–to feed the sick voyeur that lurks in this place."

"I'm *not* saying you should… go hunting, or whatever you want to call it. This is an archive, there are plenty of statements lying around."

"…you've got all this… all these people's experiences listened to and filed away."

“Right. They’re already given. They can’t be taken back. You’re not going out and hurting people, you’re just… reading what’s already here.”

She thinks he was just agreeing with her, he realizes – she didn’t comprehend his true meaning there. How could she have? He hasn’t properly explained to them that he *is* the Archive. He already Knows all of the statements housed here. Old statements were stale even when he hadn’t read them yet. Now, they’re even less fulfilling.

As a child, he hated reading anything that he felt like he had read before. It seems morbidly fitting that the Archivist in him is much the same way.

“Think of it like… like harm reduction,” Georgie is saying now. “From what I can gather, abstinence just isn’t an option for you, at least not right now. The next best thing is to meet yourself where you are. Even if you can’t stop, you can still take steps to minimize the harm – and that includes harm to yourself. Reading the statements that are already here – I think it’s justifiable, if the alternative is starving to death.”

“I am not sure how long this might continue for. Maybe years. Maybe forever.”

“Maybe. But right now, you need to take it one step at a time. You’re getting ready to hurl yourself into danger. You should be at full strength for that. If you aren’t going to sleep, you at least need to eat something.”

She has a point. There is one other concern, though.

“It seems I cannot avoid the ceaseless gaze of – Jonah–”

“–still there, still watching me–”

“–eyes were always focused on something, always watching. And – I always felt afraid–”

“–being under constant scrutiny and observation–”

“–it may be worth your while to keep an eye on the statements – in case he finds his way here–”

"–my mind has always been receptive to the thoughts that lurk in the written page–"

"–that throw out strange or sometimes even dangerous things–"

"–a simple ruse or deception–"

"–quietly waiting for you to lose your footing, to slip up and fall."

"You're afraid of getting tricked into reading the wrong statement again."

Jon nods, not quite meeting her eye. All of the statements housed here are already catalogued in the Archive. He can recall them on his own word for word, if he concentrates. But something about that doesn't *feel* right. Physically reading the statement, speaking it into the tape recorder… it's like its own little ritual – like there's an order of operations that has to be followed or it doesn't *count*, somehow.

"…I outlined basic checks in due diligence–"

"–checking and double checking–"

"–before I finally felt safe enough–"

"–to read a statement – hitting record and speaking it aloud."

"Well… we can probably vet them before giving them to you?"

"…they were also there as a backup in case something went horribly wrong – in case–"

"–it tried to read me back."

"Okay," Georgie says after a moment's consideration. "I'll let Basira know."

Her expression is concerned, but there's something else underneath it. It doesn't seem like judgment, or suspicion, or any of the other reactions he's come to expect when discussing his reliance on the statements. It's definitely not fear; this is Georgie. Pity, maybe?

Whatever it is, it makes him feel small and exposed and uncomfortably seen.

“Jon, look at me.” He does, with hesitation. “I know things are bad, and I’ll admit I was skeptical when you first said you wanted to change, but based on what I’ve seen over the past few months? I believe in you. It’s okay to have a little faith in yourself, too. I think you’ll need to, if you want to get through this.”

His gaze drifts to the floor, self-conscious.

“Anyway, it's probably best that Elias doesn’t see us pre-screening statements for you, right? Might make him suspicious. I can just gather a box of them and bring them down here. I’ll bring Basira with me, and we can explain the situation.” She stands and starts to walk toward the ladder, then stops abruptly. “Wait.”

She does a half-turn, not quite facing him, watching the floor pensively.

“I don’t know what I’m looking for. Is there something particular – like, do you have preferences, or – are there… nutritional requirements or something?” Jon can’t help it; he smiles at the absurdity of it all. “Do you need variety? Does a balanced diet even apply in this–”

Realizing he isn’t replying to any of her questions, she finally looks up, sees his amused smirk, and pauses mid-flustered gesture. He chuckles softly and shakes his head, mortified by the idea of cultivating a preference for statements as if choosing from a *menu*, but also just a bit shamefully, morbidly touched by her thoughtfulness.

“Well, I don’t know!” she says indignantly, but she grins back. “Fine. I’ll grab a bunch at random then, and you can just deal. Ass.”

God, he missed this easy, playful banter even more than he had realized.

Jon watches as she climbs the ladder, preparing for the customary anxiety that tends to hit him whenever she leaves his presence – that conviction that it will be the last he sees of her.

When she pulls herself up through the trapdoor, though, he's pleasantly surprised to note that the fear doesn't come. He's even more surprised that a half-hour later, when Georgie sends Basira with a box of statements but doesn't accompany her, the fear *still* doesn't overwhelm him. It shouldn't be that surprising – he *does* trust Georgie – but intellectually understanding something isn't the same as emotionally assimilating it. It seems that for once, his emotions have caught up with reality.

"Melanie needs company right now, so Georgie couldn't come with. She didn't say exactly what you needed help with, but I think I have an idea."

"…to keep an eye on the statements–"

"–they were also there as a backup in case something went horribly wrong."

"Figured as much. Anyway, Georgie said she'll come see you before she goes home today." Basira drops the box on the floor in front of him. "I told her you probably wouldn't want her present for the statements anyway. No need to expose more people to them if we can help it. I thought you'd agree."

Jon nods, thankful that Basira is on the same page and he didn't have to bother explaining it himself.

"So, any stand out to you?"

May as well get it over with, Jon thinks with a heavy sigh.

He leans over the box and sifts through them, eyes skimming over the case numbers until one catches his eye. *CASE #0020312*, the label reads. *Figures,* he thinks to himself with a grim, humorless smile, and he hands it over to Basira for her to inspect.

She skims through it quickly – *she's a fast reader,* Jon notes – and at several points her eyebrows raise and furrow.

"Seems normal enough – for a statement, anyway," she says, handing it back to him. Then, meeting his eyes: "A bit on the nose, though." Jon shrugs. "You want me to stay while you read it, right? Go on, then."

The tape recorder clicks on in his pocket, as if to voice its agreement. Jon removes it and takes a moment to glare at it before turning his eyes to the statement, clearing his throat, and beginning his monologue.

"Statement of Tova McHugh, regarding their string of near-death experiences. Original statement given December 3rd, 2002. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, the Archivist. Statement begins…"

The Coffin sits where Breekon dropped it, hungry and waiting. It's the densest, most solid thing in the room, as if it has its own gravity, a sort of metaphysical black hole. It's not as bad as the rift at Hill Top Road, but it has a similar feel to it: oppressive, wrong, its existence impossible but unavoidably present all the same.

Jon stands at the threshold of the office, blocking the entrance, Basira and Georgie standing behind him.

"So this is it, then," Georgie says. "You're *sure* you know what you're doing?"

"…as you can imagine, getting out of there proved – difficult–"

"–but they did return."

She still looks uncertain, watching the Coffin as if it might move on its own.

"…try to keep you far away–"

"–didn't want a good look inside that room – stopped at the threshold–"

"–make it very little distance over the threshold before – swallowed–"

"–you must trust me on that and not come looking–"

"–supervise from a distance–"

"Jon," Basira says, cutting him off, "we get it. It's dangerous, stay away, *et cetera*. I can feel the compulsion from here; you don't need to tell me twice, let alone five times."

Jon barely hears her, his mind already entirely occupied with what he's about to do. He stands paralyzed, knees locked, hands trembling just slightly, pulse thundering in his throat. Already his breath feels constricted, and he hasn't even opened the thing yet.

"Do you need more time?" Georgie asks gently.

Jon shuts his eyes, swallows around the lump in his throat, and shakes his head *no.* The longer he puts it off, the harder it will be to take the plunge. And Daisy has waited long enough.

"Hey. Look at me."

Jon breathes out, opens his eyes, and turns to face her. She opens her arms slightly, offering an embrace – but he shakes his head, giving her an apologetic look. Pressure is usually good, grounding him, but right now – well, he's about to have all of creation pressing in on him. Any reminder of that is only going to send him spiraling.

"Okay. You have everything you need?"

He nods, trying to project whatever thin veneer of confidence he can muster – more for himself than the others, really. He holds up the tape recorder with Daisy's statement tape in it, then gestures vaguely at the tape recorders littering his desk.

"…like breadcrumbs taking us home. Home, in this case, was–"

"Martin," Georgie says with a knowing smile. "I'll make sure he gets your message – and yes," she says, seeing him about to interject, "I'll make sure he doesn't read it outside the tunnels. And I'll explain… the situation. Don't worry about things over here. Just focus on what you need to do on your end."

Jon nods again, clenching and unclenching his fist at his side, stuffing the tape recorder back into his pocket with the other hand.

Time to stop dithering, he tells himself firmly.

"Tell Daisy I–" Basira blurts out, then pauses, struggling for words. "Tell her…"

She breathes out a short exhale and looks up at Jon. He nods at her: *I understand.*

"Tell her I'm waiting." She pauses, biting her lip. "And Jon?" He makes a questioning noise. "Come back safe," she says, then turns on her heel and walks briskly away down the hall.

"We'll see you home soon, Jon," Georgie says. Despite her reassuring tone, he can sense her lingering apprehension. "Don't get lost."

"…I'd – get out of there as soon as possible," he says, trying to mirror her composure.

"You'd better. I doubt I'll be the only one cross with you if you stay away too long."

The tape recorders fill the room with a low, static-leaden murmuring – dozens of overlapping tones, unbroken streams of phonemes rendered nearly incomprehensible, discrete parts unable to compete against the cacophony of the whole. Although it sounds like the background noise of a crowd to Jon, he Knows every word being said: a litany of horror and dread unspooling into the air around him.

He also Knows that they will continue running, replaying each statement on a loop until he returns, no batteries required.

A notebook sits on his desk, battered and careworn. It's Martin's, half-filled with poems and works-in-progress, many of them from the weeks he was living in the Archives. He left it here when he went to work for Peter. Whether it was meant as a deliberate symbolic gesture – leaving the past behind him, sacrificing this sentimental part of himself in order to become what Peter's plan required him to be – or was simply an oversight after months of having no time or mind for writing, Jon still doesn't Know. He never asked. In the future, after Martin started writing again, Jon felt it was best not to reopen old wounds for the sake of satiating his own curiosity.

If only he could have learned *that* lesson earlier in life.

Jon has never been a fan of poetry. It's never really resonated with him; he's never *understood* it, and he… doesn't have much patience for things he cannot understand. But then, Martin went to work for Peter Lukas – and the last time Jon was here, he had burned every other bridge between himself and humanity.

When he was a child, he convinced himself that he didn't need friends, didn't need affection. He found human connection in books, and he told himself that it was enough. It wasn't, in retrospect: he entered adolescence and then adulthood with stunted social skills, and practicing didn't seem worth the risk of failure. Between that and being the Archivist, it's no wonder he chased everyone away.

By the time he woke up from his first coma, he knew that books would be no replacement for actual companionship, but he thought it might at least take the edge off, like it used to when he was a child. It backfired terribly. He would always Know how the story ended before even

finishing the first chapter, and it would demolish any motivation to continue reading. It wasn't just that his reading habits remained as particular as they were when he was young, having little patience for anything that felt like he had read it before. It was that he couldn't have a moment of peace from the knowledge of what he had become.

One day he stumbled across Martin's notebook in Document Storage, along with some spoken word recordings that Martin had made while living in the Archives. At first, Jon didn't know what the tapes were, and listening to any tapes that turned up had long since become automatic for him. Once he realized what was on them, he probably should have stopped. Instead, he listened to every second of that handful of tapes, over and over and over again. He felt guilty – he had already violated Martin's privacy once before, when he was deep in the throes of paranoia – but he justified it to himself because he… he'd needed to hear Martin's voice.

The poetry was… well, Jon still didn't *get* it, not really. But he found himself liking it anyway, because it was Martin's voice and Martin's words and Martin's story, and Jon didn't have to *understand* it for it to have warmth and meaning and value. He should have been content with the tapes, but he kept stealing glances at the notebook, itching to open it and start reading. Part of it was that simple curiosity that was always leading him astray, but for once, that wasn't the loudest part of him.

It wasn't a need to Know. It was a need for closeness.

So, he pushed that guilty voice in his head aside and… he read. Unlike the fiction stories he had been trying to lose himself in, he never once Knew anything about a poem before he finished reading it. He rarely Knew anything about it even *after* reading it, and then rereading it, and then rereading it again. For the first time in his life, not having answers was… refreshing. Freeing, even.

It didn't take long for Jon to memorize every word, cover to cover. He never grew bored of them, despite their familiarity.

Gingerly, almost reverently, Jon turns the pages. There are a handful of poems in here about *him*, and even now, indelibly etched into his memory, reading them on the page still makes him feel seen in a way that is all at once terrifying and comforting. Affecting, certainly, but in a way he could appreciate, once he gave it a chance.

You're stalling, Jon tells himself, closing the notebook and placing one last tape on top of it.

He closes his eyes and forces himself to take several deep breaths – it's the last chance he'll have for the next few days – and he checks his pocket for the tape recorder with Daisy's statement in it. Pointless, really; he already Knows it's there, same as it was the last dozen times he checked.

Swallowing hard, he finally turns to look at the Coffin. The moment he lays eyes on it, the static rises in his mind.

Oh, shut up, Jon thinks tiredly. The Dread Powers are like cats yowling at overflowing food bowls, insisting that they haven't had supper yet. At least cats are endearing. The Fears are noisy and intrusive with none of the charm. *You're all so goddamn needy, you know that?*

The Coffin carries on, and Jon rolls his eyes. Wrapping himself in annoyance does little to drown out the fear, but it offers a slight buffer. He'll take it.

You're still stalling, he reprimands himself.

With trembling hands he picks up the key, fits it into the lock… and he opens the lid. It lifts easily with only a slight creak, no heft or resistance to it: it *wants* to be opened, like so many other hungry doors lurking around this world, bear traps and snares and spiderwebs all lying in wait for somebody foolish and curious enough to ignore all the alarm bells for just one… peek… inside.

Knock-knock, comes the intrusive thought.

Shut up, Jon shoots back.

The tape recorder clicks on, whirring impatiently in his pocket, as if to urge him onward. *You too,* he snaps – but as much as his knee-jerk impulse is to be contrary, he *has* put this off long enough.

Jon steels himself, takes one last deep breath – savoring fresh air, full lungs, airways clear of dirt and grime and debris – and he begins his descent.

Martin is in Peter's office, tending to some tedious administrative tasks. His brain feels fuzzy, thoughts sluggish and stunted from the lack of stimulation. The tick-tock of the wall clock drones on and on. He's considered removing the batteries, but it's the only company he's had in days. Complete silence might be worse. Besides, the longer he sits here, the less and less the noise scrapes against the edges of his consciousness – and even when it does penetrate the fog filling his head, he can't bring himself to care.

If Peter intends for the monotony to highlight his isolation and desensitize him to the absence of… well, *everything*, it's working.

Then, between one moment and the next, there's a *shift.* It crashes into him, tears through the quiet, and the world around him comes rushing back in, sharp and blinding, a cacophonous flood of sensory input. There's a palpable void where one shouldn't be, and he knows with certainty that it's distinct from the general sense of absence that he's grown accustomed to over the past few months. The Lonely feels soft, quiet, gentle – natural, like a cocoon tailored specifically for him. *This* feels like a knife to the gut, a gaping wound, an alert screaming in his mind that something is wrong, *wrong,* ***wrong***–

"Something's happened," he says to himself. He flinches at the sound. It's jarring, hearing his own voice, raspy as it is with disuse.

Before he even realizes that he's moving, he's out of the office and hurrying down the hallway, not bothering to close the door behind him.

"Jon," he whispers with a passion and urgency that feels alien to him now, thoughts no longer muffled and detached. He doesn't know how he knows, but he does: Jon's done something

drastic, and given his track record, it can't be good.

The only thought running through his mind is *Jon,* playing on a loop like a stuck tape; like the nervous stammering of the person he used to be, intimidated by and enamored with the man in equal measure; like a – like a prayer: *Jon.*

Martin picks up his pace, making a beeline for the Archives.

Chapter End Notes

- The Buried, Round Two: BEGIN.

- I might not have much free time to write this weekend, so the next chapter probably won't be ready until next weekend at least. It will have some Martin POV though, FINALLY. This story hasn't had enough Martin screentime yet and that is entirely a hell of my own making, but I WILL remedy it. Also: ACTUAL DAISY CONTENT SOON, I SWEAR.

- Citations for Jon's letter to Martin are as follows: MAG 040; 112/007/029/102; 007/150; 020/019; 150; 013; 135; 048/144/007/021; 021; 013/002/032/147/153/013; 161/091/101/089/135; 048/028/067/013; 143/150/008/013; 135/048/009; 013; 150; 013/117; 085/052; 063/124; 123; 011; 123/133; 070/154/123; 133/019/036/011; 094/088; 075; 135; 127; 124/157/050/157/130; 143/107/012/056; 122/012/057; 013; 145/121; 150; 042; 042; 032; 037/136/110; 152/008/101/153/032/129/153; 117/155/013/155; 133/112/152/154/013/051/049.

- Citations for Jon's dialogue are as follows, broken down by section:
Section 1: MAG 064; 019; 138/139; 019; 058; 148; 121/014/089; 066/135; 043; 096; 138/060/154/060/113/017/005/116/121; 054/022/054/147; 057/091; 113/057; 155.
Section 2: 150/096; 095/006/023/157/139; 125; 047.
Section 3: None.
Section 4: None.

- The cited dialogue between Peter and Martin is from MAG 126. And it probably goes without saying but the Jonah/Elias statement quote is from MAG 160.

- As always, you can also just ask if you want to know where a particular line comes from. c:

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

Lost and Found

Chapter Summary

In which Martin muddles through the fog. Meanwhile, Jon makes his way through the Buried.

Chapter Notes

CWs for Chapter 12: It's the Buried, so… expect exactly what it says on the tin labeled Too Close I Cannot Breathe, that is to say: claustrophobia, being trapped, descriptions of asphyxiation and immobility, etc. Also: anxiety/panic symptoms; a brief mention of suicidal ideation; mentions of canon-typical worms & kidnapping; swears; and Lonely-typical Martin (isolation, low self-worth, etc.).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Martin is so single-minded in reaching the Archives, he forgets to shroud himself before descending the stairs to the basement. It's a miracle that no one is around to intercept him before he can make it to Jon's office and close the door behind him.

For a long minute he stands there at the threshold, staring blankly into the room, taking in the bizarre scene.

A long, wooden crate sits in the center of the room, loose chains snaking underneath and coiled on the floor around it. A heavy padlock affixed to one of the links yawns open. Dozens upon dozens of tape recorders are arranged like a summoning circle around the box and every single one of them is on, filling the space with a low, jumbled drone of indistinct syllables.

Curiosity getting the best of him, Martin draws closer. When he catches sight of the ominous *DO NOT OPEN* scrawled on the lid, the realization hits him.

"Is that a *coffin?"* he says to himself, flummoxed.

"We really need you, Jon –"

Martin jumps just slightly when his ears pick out the sound of his own voice from the rest of the chatter. His eyes wander to Jon's desk where a single tape recorder rests, isolated from the clutter on the floor. As the statement continues, Martin recognizes it with a jolt.

"We – I need you. And I – I know that you're not – I know there's no way to –"

"Where did he get this?" Martin wonders aloud, reaching out to pick the thing up – and only then does he notice the notebook it sits on. "Where did he get *this?"* he says, a bit louder.

There's a scrap of paper sticking out of the top like a bookmark. Bewildered, he sets the tape recorder aside and flips the notebook open to the marked page.

Were I prone to flights of fancy, I daresay I would call his words portentous, the paper reads. Jon's handwriting has always been nearly illegible, and it only got worse after his burn, but Martin is intimately familiar with it after all this time. A tiny swell of affection begins to bloom in his chest before he forces it back.

You can't, he tells himself, shutting his eyes. Peter's plan – whatever it may be – requires Martin to steep himself in loneliness.

Yes, he agreed to the plan assuming that Jon would never wake up. And he's glad that Jon woke up, of *course* he is – albeit in a muffled, distant sort of way. He should probably be more bothered by that, but he notes it with only mild interest. None of this changes the simple fact that his feelings for Jon were never actually going to *go* anywhere. That sort of thing just… isn't *for* Martin, let alone with Jon.

At least this way, Martin can put those dead-end feelings to some practical use. He has no illusions about being a hero. Even if Peter isn't mistaken or lying about the Extinction's emergence, Martin doubts that he of all people could make any real difference. But with any luck, maybe he can keep Jon *safe* – or saf*er*, at least.

Not from himself, though, Martin thinks, glaring at the Coffin. *He's so…*

He heaves a sigh before turning his attention back to the strip of paper with its cryptic message. The makeshift bookmark is held in place on the side by a paperclip. There is a drawn arrow pointing down, and his eyes follow its trajectory to see it pointing at –

Oh.

Martin can feel his cheeks flush. The arrow sits just above a stanza that he could best describe as *blatantly pining,* and…

"Oh, god, did Jon *read this?* That's–"

"Embarrassing?"

Martin whips around to see a woman standing in the doorway. He hadn't even heard the door *open.*

"Martin, right? Your ears are *very* red right now," she says with a smirk. "Don't worry, he liked it. You saw the note, didn't you? A bit heavy-handed. He's always been dramatic, but he never used to be such a *sap."*

Martin opens his mouth, but no sound comes out. The idea of *speaking* with another person grates at him, bringing his thoughts to a grinding halt like a crowbar jammed between corroded gears.

"I'm Georgie. Jon's friend." Martin shuts his eyes and grits his teeth, willing her to *go away.* She doesn't, though; doesn't even wait for him to reply before continuing: "We need to talk."

It's worse than it was the first time. *How is it worse?*

Did the stairs end so soon last time? Did the walls close in so quickly? How long has he been here already? How much longer will he have to stay?

Jon stops for a moment, panting in short gasps, desperate for whatever stagnant air he can force into his lungs. As if to protest the delay, the walls press in tighter and squeeze a breathless whimper out of him.

Keep moving, he tells himself. *Just – keep moving. There's an end, and if you keep moving, you'll reach it faster.*

Without warning or invitation, the tape recorder clicks on and Daisy's statement begins to play.

"...kept walking into the earth" – a peal of static – *"completely out of sight"* – more static – *"the lid closed very slowly, and then he was gone."*

That's… not where he paused the tape the last time he listened to it, he realizes with crawling dread. Why did it pick up *there?* And it's – is it making its own sentences, mimicking his clumsy attempts at communication? Is it mocking him, trying to stoke his fear? Can the Buried somehow affect the tapes? What *else* could possibly be doing it? The Powers usually hold little sway in one another's domains – except for… except for the Watcher, after Jon opened the door.

He's fairly certain that that no longer holds true. It's not as if he can still direct the Ceaseless Watcher's focus; that was in a future that has not – *will not* – come to pass. Still… curiosity is as much of a pest as it's always been. Jon resists for a brief few moments before giving in to the urge to Know, even as he curses himself for it.

It becomes immediately clear that just like the last time, he can't See anything in this place. Reassuring, in some ways – the Eye can't reach him here, and neither can Jonah Magnus – but the Archivist in him still recoils at the confirmation: he can't *See*, he can't *Know,* he *can't*–

Attempting to tamp down his mounting panic, Jon lets out a shaky breath.

Breathe, he tells himself – and an instant later, he realizes his mistake. Predictably enough, when he tries to draw in a breath, the earth contracts again and chokes him before he can get to the two-second mark. The forced exhale comes out as a whine, and he hates himself for it.

You can't stop here, he thinks. *Keep going.*

Blinking grit out of his eyes, he presses on.

"I shouldn't be here," Martin mutters to himself, frowning at the weathered stone floor.

"What was that?" Georgie asks, glancing at him as she reaches the bottom of the ladder.

"I wasn't talking to you."

Georgie makes a show of scanning the tunnel.

"Well, I'm the only other one here."

Martin's gotten used to talking to himself, but he doesn't bother explaining that. He's already exhausted from what brief interaction he's had with her so far, and he doesn't care enough to push through the haze.

Georgie starts walking towards a collection of chairs arranged in a loose circle a little ways down the tunnel. *Why are there chairs down here?* Martin wonders idly, before discarding the question with deliberate indifference. He cannot afford to give his curiosity any quarter, no matter how mild.

"Well?" Georgie says, sitting down. "Pick a seat and fall into it. You look dead on your feet. Honestly, I'm starting to think chronic fatigue is a job requirement for you lot."

Martin lets out the beginnings of a small chuckle. Almost instantaneously, he strangles it, but the noise echoes in his head, unwanted and unsettling. It sounds wrong to his ears, discordant and out-of-place. It's only now that he thinks to wonder how long it's been since he's laughed.

It doesn't matter, he tells himself automatically before repeating: "I really shouldn't be here."

"Listen," Georgie says, taking on a more serious tone, "I promised Jon I'd pass a message to you, and this is the only place we can talk without your creeper boss spying on us." She holds up a folded piece of paper. "He left you a letter, too."

"Fine," he says flatly, approaching and holding out a hand. "Give it here."

"You can't read it outside the tunnels."

"Fine," he says again through clenched teeth. She stares him down for a moment – he resists the impulse to back away – but she does hand it over. He meets her halfway, avoiding skin contact as he takes it from her. He doesn't even have to put conscious thought into that anymore; at this point, it's become second nature.

Taking a few steps back, he stares down at the paper held loosely in his hands. His thumb toys with one of the corners, peeling the top layer up ever so slightly before letting it snap back down with a soft fluttering noise. There is a part of him – shoved into a dusty corner of his mind, forcibly stifled and neglected – burning to unfold it. A more prominent presence

overshadows the first, looming over his shoulder, whispering insistently about restraint and resolve and a greater purpose.

When he notices that Georgie is watching him, he sets his jaw and forces himself to meet her eyes.

“I can read just fine on my own. I don’t need company.”

“Don’t know about that,” she says, not quite under her breath. Then, in a more conversational tone: “There are a lot of things that Jon couldn’t communicate. I’m here to fill in the gaps.”

“He went into the Coffin.” Martin barely recognizes the monotone as coming from him.

Georgie makes an affirmative noise. Something ugly and unwanted simmers just underneath Martin’s contrived calm, a nagging itch clamoring for attention in the back of his mind. When Martin takes a breath, he can only manage to fill his lungs halfway.

“Why would he…”

Martin falters. It’s too broad of a query, and just scratching the surface is enough to break the uneasy ceasefire between the Powers laying claim to him. Martin can feel the pull of the Eye begging the question, the pushback of the Lonely at the prospect of involving himself with *others*.

“It says ‘do not open’ in big letters,” Martin says instead. Not a question, just an observation: a tangible, easily digestible detail that he can latch onto, enough to distract the Eye but impersonal so as not to offend the Forsaken.

Georgie snorts at that. “No better way to entice Jon to do the exact opposite.”

If she was trying for levity, it falls flat to Martin's ears. The carefully constructed stillness he's grown so adept at cloaking himself in shatters. When he speaks, his voice comes out sharp, louder – more *emotional* – than he had intended.

"Why is he *so* – why would he go in there?"

"Because–"

Martin makes an agitated noise before he can stop himself. The slight echo of his own voice bouncing back at him off the tunnel walls is already too much company; being repeatedly reminded that there is an entire other *person* here is unbearable. Every atom of his existence is screaming at him to turn his back on her and *get away*.

Georgie falls quiet and waits. After a few minutes cocooned safely within his own thoughts, Martin looks up and is surprised to see her still sitting there. He doesn't know *why* he's surprised; he didn't see her leave. There's just some part of him that cannot reconcile the concept of someone else being physically present in the same space as him.

"Sit," Georgie says. Just a single word, spoken softly but with the weight of a command.

Before he even consciously makes the decision to move, Martin is closing the distance between them and lowering himself into a chair. Unthinkingly, he chooses the furthest possible seat from her, and when he sits, he scoots backwards a few feet, as unconscious and instinctive as breathing. If she's bothered by that, she doesn't say.

"It was important to him that you read that," she says, nodding at the paper still clutched in Martin's hands.

"'Was'…?"

Georgie gives him a peculiar look. "It's not a suicide note, if that's what you're worried about."

“What? I wasn’t – I didn’t…”

The thought hadn’t crossed his mind. Should it have? Is that something he should have thought to worry about – that he *would* have thought to worry about once upon a time? It – it is, isn’t it? He *knows* how Jon can be, how he spirals, how he’s his own worst enemy – how when he’s not actively putting himself in danger, he’s hurting himself through casual self-destruction and neglect. How much has Martin changed, that the possibility of Jon deliberately hurting himself didn’t even occur to him?

Wasn’t half the point of Martin doing this to protect Jon? Because he *cares* about Jon? When did he become so out-of-touch with that part of himself?

“*Should* I be worried?” he whispers to himself.

“No! I mean, not about that – not now, anyway – I mean–!” Georgie grimaces. “Shit. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to give you something new to worry about. You just – you seemed hung up on the past tense?” She breathes a short laugh. “I think I’ve just been spending too much time with Jon. He overanalyzes things like that.”

“Semantics,” Martin says obscurely. He isn’t even entirely sure what he means, but Georgie nods as if she understands.

“Always have to be conscious of word choice around that man. I have *seen* him brood over verb tense for days trying to find meaning where none was intended, instead of just *asking*–”

“So what is it, then?” Martin interrupts, his voice tight, staring down at the paper in his hands again.

“It’s… hmm.” Georgie gives him a look that he can’t quite identify. “I think you should just read it. Take your time, and let me know when you have questions.”

“I don’t think–”

“Trust me,” she says with a tight smile, “you’ll have questions.”

“Fine,” Martin says, grinding his teeth together. Georgie seems nearly as stubborn as Jon. The sooner he gets this over with, the sooner he can shake her off.

He heaves a longsuffering sigh and begins to read. As it turns out, he does have questions, the first of many making itself known mere seconds after he begins reading.

I’m sorry I left you.

...now I’m here, trying to explain things–

–had changed since he left–

–it seemed he was alone–

“Who is ‘he’?” Martin asks.

“Hm?”

“It keeps referring to a ‘he.’”

Georgie blinks. “You’re kidding, right? I know *Jon* is oblivious, but–”

“What?”

She frowns. “How far are you?”

“Only a few lines in…? ‘You’ is me, I’m assuming, since it *is* written for me, but then he jumps right into–”

“Oh,” Georgie says, sounding relieved for some reason. “Yeah, I suppose you wouldn’t know yet – don’t get too tripped up by the pronouns. Ever since he woke up, Jon’s only been able to speak in statement quotes. Limits his options a bit.”

“That… explains some things,” Martin replies, remembering his brief encounter with Jon a few weeks ago. Martin had recognized some of the words as his own. It was bizarre, but he’s been trying not to dwell on the peculiarities of the one-sided conversation. Thinking about Jon at length would only make it more difficult for Martin to stay away. But now that the subject is free-floating in the air like this, his sense of curiosity is making demands again. “Why?”

“No clue. Jon hasn’t really said, and I haven’t pressed him on it. I can tell there’s some baggage there, but I wasn’t going to make him unpack it when he wouldn’t have the time or space to actually sort through it just yet. I think it’s safe to assume it’s supernatural, though. And it definitely isn’t by choice.”

Great, Martin thinks bitterly. Just what they need: more complications. When he turns his attention back to the letter, he doesn’t get much further in his reading before he has to stop again.

“Are you sure that *Jon* wrote this?”

“Mhm. He fussed over it for hours.”

“It’s just…”

“Weirdly communicative?” Georgie suggests, a knowing smirk on her face. “Uncharacteristically revealing and insightful? Indicating a level of self-awareness seemingly not typical for one Jonathan Sims?”

“I… I was just going to say ‘open,’ but… yeah?”

“Yeah,” Georgie echoes. “Just keep reading.”

Jon is stuck.

One arm is pinned to his side, elbow bruising where it presses against the wall. The other is stretched out ahead of him, bitten-short fingernails digging into the dirt for purchase. Useless. The earth is packed so tightly, he can’t quite get a grip. His bad leg is throbbing painfully with every slight shift, and he can’t seem to move the other at all. He tries to breathe through it, but he can’t seem to force his lungs to expand, trapped as he is in–

“A squeeze can be a hole less than a foot wide, sometimes going on for a long way, the rock pressing in on all sides of you,” the Archive recites matter-of-factly. *“In a particularly bad squeeze, there are parts where the walls and ceiling are so close that you can’t move your arms or bend your legs to push forward, and you just have to squirm your way to the other side like a worm–”*

Jon wriggles frantically, trying to pull one arm free to clap a hand over his mouth, but he’s *stuck–*

“–down, down, down*, down, down below the earth, there was a worm. He had not always been a worm, of course, but time and tide and life had pushed him to it – and he was, as definitely always had been the case, trapped. Boarded on all sides with no escape and no recourse.*” The words are strained and faltering, the pressure on Jon’s chest being what it is, but the Archive carries on, the statement punctuated with the occasional gasp or grunt of pain but otherwise unrelenting. *“Even in his faint and fading memories of a life that wasn’t simply stone and rancid, reeking soil, he wasn’t sure he’d ever known a thing that might be called freedom. Choices he had had, that’s true, and certainly compared to the relentless press of all the weight and dirt now on him, the simple choice of left or right or stand or sit would now seem the most outrageous of luxuries–”*

Shut up, shut up, just shut up, Jon rails against the Archive, redoubling his struggling, but it forges ahead, as if to highlight the fact that Jon cannot.

"…this was a particularly bad squeeze. Near the end, it got so bad that, if Alena hadn't gone in first, I would have told her to go back and forget Lost Johns' Cave."

Very funny, he thinks acidly.

"When had the crushing pressure in his chest become literal? When had the empty promise of the horizon finally vanished completely, replaced by the pitch darkness of this – forever wall of earth?"

Suddenly, the aforesaid earth expands outward like a vast beast drawing in a breath, and Jon pitches forward as the passageway widens just enough for him to move. It's still a squeeze, but he can at least inch his way onward again. He takes advantage of the opportunity while it still exists, blunt fingernails scrabbling against the walls as he pulls himself along.

Something in Martin gives – an overlong tug-o-war brought to an unceremonious end by a snap in the rope, sending both sides careening backwards to the ground. Like a tightly-coiled spring let loose, he stands abruptly and begins to pace, trying to suppress the uncomfortable stirrings of emotion threatening to break through the fog.

"He's only saying this because he thinks it'll change my mind about working for Peter," he mutters heatedly, running a hand through his hair, making sweeping gestures with his other hand. The letter still clenched in his fist flutters and crinkles with his sharp movements.

"What?"

"He's just–" Martin throws his head back with an aggravated sigh. "He's always been *insensitive,* but mostly in an – an awkward, off-the-cuff sort of way. And he can be snappish,

but that's mostly when he's… scared, or overtired, or… but this" – Martin smacks the paper in his hand with the backs of his fingers – "this is just *cruel."*

"I don't understa-"

"Of course you don't," Martin spits out. "Just – using my – my *feelings* for him to try to manipulate–"

"Hey, hey, whoa," Georgie interrupts, "that's not–"

"What, then?" Martin laughs, and it feels almost caustic on his tongue. "He just – he's *gone* for six months and then he comes back and suddenly he's – he's giving a *love confession?"*

"Yeah, he was worried that you wouldn't be-"

"He doesn't even *like* me most of the time!" Martin's voice cracks. He can't bring himself to care. "Even after – I mean, he was *nicer* in the months before…" He closes his eyes and swallows, throat constricted, unable to say the words. "But he wasn't around much, so it makes sense. He wasn't having to put up with me on a daily basis. Made it easy for him to forget all the things about me that he hated."

"I don't think–"

"And – and even when he *was* here, he was distant. Avoiding all of us, like it would keep us… I don't know, *safe?"* Martin's arms fall limp at his sides, the fight gone out of him. "And – and then he… just…"

He trails off feebly, his burst of energy sapping away from him. When he doesn't rally, Georgie begins to speak.

“Well… being avoidant and snippy, that definitely sounds like Jon,” she concedes. “But trust me, he’s not capable of using your feelings for him to manipulate you.”

“What?” Martin eyes flick to her.

“Don’t get me wrong, he’s an ass sometimes. I know he mistreated you. *He* knows he mistreated you. He said as much when he was staying with me.”

He did?

“Judging by your reaction, I’m assuming he never told *you* as much.” Georgie sighs. “I *told* him to try talking to you. He was isolating himself, and he needed more than just me – needed someone who actually knew about… everything that goes on here. I suggested you, since he talked about you all the time.”

He did? Martin thinks again, disbelieving.

“And based on what he said, it seemed like you cared about him? Though I don’t think he realized how much. Honestly, he didn’t even notice how much he went on about you until I started pointing it out.” She gives him an amused look, and Martin averts his eyes. “He’s *astonishingly* oblivious sometimes. He gets so focused on the little details that he misses the big picture. But you already know that, don’t you?”

Martin continues to stare at his feet, muscles tensed and knees locked.

“Anyway, he was worried about you, too. I kept nagging him about it. Eventually he did say he talked to you, but I’m willing to bet it wasn’t exactly a heart-to-heart.”

“No,” Martin says quietly. “I mean, he did talk to me after he was kidnapped for the first time–”

“The first time?” Georgie repeats. “It happened more than once?”

“Yeah,” he sighs, rubbing his forehead with his free hand. He hates that he has to specify *which kidnapping*. “And actually, it – thinking about it, it was technically it was the second time, I suppose, if you count Daisy. Anyway, he, uh… he said he wanted to check in with me before going traveling. And he… did seem worried, I guess?” After a beat, Martin adds hurriedly: “About – about *all* of us.”

“But he mentioned *you* specifically. Said you were taking on too much.”

“I was–” Martin sputters, pulling his hand away from his face and flinging his arm out in agitation. “How can *he* of all people say–”

“I know, I know,” Georgie says, placating. “He’s a self-destructive workaholic throwing stones at glass houses.”

“Boulders, more like,” he huffs. Georgie chuckles at that.

Martin thinks back. Elias had had him start reading statements to keep up with the workload while Jon was… in hiding, then doing independent investigation, then *kidnapped* – which Elias had neglected to even *mention*. Jon had always seemed fixated on the statements to the point of possessiveness, and Martin had been anxious that Jon would feel like he was… infringing, somehow? And Jon *had* been upset, but not jealous or territorial as Martin had expected. He was… he *was* worried, wasn’t he? That the statements would take a toll on Martin’s mental health? Because Jon knew what they were like, and…

More like unleashing an avalanche on a glass house, Martin thinks, pressing his lips together in a thin line.

“Couldn’t wrap his head around the idea that someone might be worried about *him*.” It isn’t until he hears his voice that Martin realizes he’s spoken the thought aloud.

“Yeah. He’s always been like that. I think he’s working on it, though?” When Martin doesn’t respond, Georgie continues. “But, back to my earlier point… yes, he can be an ass. But saying that he loves you, just to convince you to come back? Does that *really* sound like him to you?”

“It’s more likely than the alternative,” Martin says stubbornly, and Georgie sighs.

“It’s just… not something he would even think to do in the first place. His guilt complex wouldn’t allow for it, first off. And he can be thoughtless, but even when he’s being harsh, it’s not *premeditated*. But more than that, he’s not… hm. How to put this nicely…” She taps the knuckles of one hand lightly against her lips. “Jon doesn’t have the emotional intelligence necessary for that.”

Martin blinks several times, lips parted just slightly.

“That was… uh, blunt.”

“Well, it’s true.” Georgie shrugs, unconcerned. “He’s clever in a lot of ways, but *this* sort of thing doesn’t come naturally to him. Has trouble enough processing his own feelings, let alone managing others’ emotions. He’s always been either hypervigilant or oblivious with not much middle ground.” She casts a pensive look at the floor. “He seems… better than he used to be – or he’s trying, at least – but I still wouldn’t call him socially skilled. Even if he was, he’s still just not subtle enough to be deliberately manipulative.”

“What do you mean?”

“I *mean* he’s a shit liar.” Martin snorts at that. “I take it you’ve noticed.”

“A little over a year ago, he got stabbed–”

“Of course he did,” Georgie groans.

“Refused to explain how it happened. Said he cut himself with a bread knife.”

“A *bread knife?”* This time, she laughs outright.

“I know, right?” Martin exhales with a little *heh.* “He just – I knew he was lying, and *he* knew that I knew he was lying, but he just – he stuck to that story.” His lips curl into a small, timid, but inarguably fond smile. “Just… stubborn, you know?”

“Yeah,” Georgie says, the corners of her eyes crinkling when she mirrors his expression.

Martin clears his throat, smile fading. “But – but that doesn’t *mean* anything.”

“It does, though.”

Martin looks off to the side, chewing on the inside of his cheek.

“Look,” Georgie says, “I’ve known Jon awhile. We even dated for a time.” Martin’s knee-jerk flicker of jealousy must show on his face, because Georgie grins. “Don’t worry, we’re not romantically compatible, as it turns out. Strictly platonic.”

“I didn’t say any-”

“You didn’t have to.” Before Martin can protest again, she presses on. “Point is, you can trust me when I say that he’s not the type to throw the word ‘love’ around carelessly, let alone to use it for emotional manipulation.”

“Fine,” Martin says tersely, digging his heels in again. “Then he’s just *mistaken*. What he feels isn’t *love.* He just feels guilty, and – and lonely, and he thinks this will make it hurt

less.” Martin scoffs. “Or, hell, even the opposite: he knows this won’t work and he’s hoping it hurts when I push him away, so that we’ll be even. Using me to – to punish himself.”

“Yeah, I can see why you’d think that,” Georgie says. “But it’s not the case. He’s… changed a lot.”

“When? *How?* You – you keep saying that, but what is that even supposed to *mean?”* His lips move soundlessly for several seconds before he bursts out, “He was *asleep* for six months, not – not getting therapy!”

Georgie raises her eyebrows at the increasingly battered letter trembling in Martin’s clenched fist.

“I think you should keep reading.”

“H-h-hello?”

The voice is weak, almost a whisper, but it startles Jon all the same. It sounded like it was coming from some immeasurable distance to his right, and he strains his ears for more.

“Is – is someone there? P-please, please help me, I can’t – I don’t know where I am, I – I can’t–”

It cuts out with a pained wheeze, but Jon’s heard enough to recognize it.

Well, he doesn’t know who it belongs to, but he’s heard it before, the first time he was here: a hapless plea from a stranger who Jon failed to save. The words are exactly the same. He knows, because they’ve haunted him since the first time he heard them, playing over and over in his mind on sleepless nights. Even after the ritual, they remained etched in his memory,

only now they had to compete with the cries of the billions of other souls that Jon had condemned. That he could not help.

“Please,” the voice tries again. “Please, are you still there?” Jon tries to grasp for a statement, but the Archive is eerily silent. “H-hello? Please, *please* say something.”

Jon was unable to find him last time, but maybe… maybe this time, he can–

As if to quash that thought, the earth begins to shake, rattling his teeth and sending a shooting pain through his bad leg.

“Help me–!” The stranger lets out the beginning of a muffled scream, cut short when the earth surrounding them begins to properly heave and thunder.

The packed dirt beneath Jon’s feet begins to give way and then he’s falling, swept down, down, *down.* He doesn’t know how long the landslide continues before the earth becomes solid again, compressing around him and arresting his descent.

“I’m sorry,” Jon whispers to no one, as his ragged panting begins to subside. “I–”

When his eyelids fly open, he barely registers the debris that begins to sting his eyes.

“It’s me?” he murmurs with a sense of wonder. Daring, he tests again: “Not the Archive.” He lets out a disbelieving laugh. “Just – just *me*–”

The hungry earth constricts again as if with a vengeance, smothering the words before they can leave his throat and filling his mouth with the taste of soil.

As Martin reads on, his restless pacing continues.

After leaving the hospital, the next thing that is properly clear in my mind is–

–I need him to be okay.

I couldn't see him or hear him–

–I didn't even get a chance to speak to him – asked what had happened, he was just gone. And I was alone again.

Jon doesn't know what it is to be Lonely, Martin thinks bitterly. Martin of all people knows what it is to be alone, and Jon isn't *alone*. And as long as Martin can keep Peter distracted, he won't be. Martin made his choice. He has to see this through.

A moment later, he's admonishing himself. He's being unkind. Unnecessarily harsh. It isn't Jon's fault that Martin's Lonely. This is just a poorly veiled attempt to distract himself from the surge of guilt he feels at reading the words. Because… because there's no denying that Martin wasn't there when Jon woke up; that he hasn't been there since Jon came back. Jon might not need him, not *really,* but… Martin still should have been there, right? What if he never gets another chance?

Martin's blood runs cold in his veins, his chest tightening more with every passing moment.

What if… what if Jon never comes home?

I wanted to say something reassuring, to reach out and let him know I was still there–

–I wanted to act, to help, to do something, but – I felt helpless to do anything but watch as events progressed.

I think he might be part of something really awful, and I don't know how to make him see that – of course I did worry. I knew that, secretly, he was as well.

Martin huffs, blinking rapidly against the sting in his eyes.

"What?" Georgie asks.

"Nothing," he says, tongue feeling thick and heavy in his dry mouth. "He just… sometimes I wonder if he actually hears himself speak."

"Mm. Yeah, I get that," she says after a moment, but Martin is already looking back down at the letter.

I know how that sounds – but – I ask you to read on.

Don't… misunderstand me, please–

–I trusted his instincts almost as much as I trusted my own.

There was a time – not even that long ago – that hearing Jon say that he trusted him would have meant… everything. Now, it skates right over him, leaving only the barest impression. Or, that's what Martin tells himself as he reads on.

More truthfully, it's that he doesn't dare pause to examine his emotional state right now.

Jon continues… begging, really, for Martin to listen to him. Ironic, really. How many times have the roles been reversed? How many times did Jon brush off Martin's sincere attempts to take care of him, to encourage him to take care of *himself?*

And then–

Statement of Georgina Barker regarding–

–travel through time.

Martin rereads the lines silently to himself several times, his brain wrapping around the individual words without quite comprehending the whole.

"Travel through time?" he says, as if it will make any more sense spoken aloud.

"Right." Georgie takes a breath, claps her hands on her knees, and gives Martin a significant look. "You… may want to sit down for this part."

Partly to keep himself company, partly to make strategic use of this newest development in his overly convoluted existence, Jon records a statement: a rambling, stream-of-consciousness explanation, cramming as many of his own words as he can onto the tape while he has the chance.

"Every – every single mark was orchestrated by Jonah. Well, almost every one. I was marked by the Web when I was – when I found – when…" Even now, he cannot bring himself to share it where someone else might hear. "Before I ever started working at the Institute," he says instead, "which is partly why Jonah saw me as a candidate in the first place. That and… and how easy I was to manipulate. You were right, Georgie, when you suggested that I was chosen because of my inexperience, not in spite of it. He… he read me like a… he knew I would play right into his hands.

"And – and of course being marked by the Eye, that happened when I signed the contract to become the Head Archi- the Archivist. Though, I think what crystallized it may have been my, ah – need to know, and – and paranoia, after…" Grimacing, Jon scrapes by another tight segment of the passage. "After finding Gertrude's body. After Jane Prentiss. Jonah *knew* that she was targeting the Institute, and he let it happen. Put everyone in danger just to see how *resilient* I was, if I was… if I was a *survivor,* if I was worth investing in or if I should just be – eliminated, so he could move on to a more promising candidate–"

Jon lets out a strained whine as he struggles through yet another squeeze.

"And I – I survived. Not that *I* had anything to do with that. It was… it was Sasha's competence, her ability to act under pressure and think on her feet, which was – the last time

we saw her, the *real* her, and I should have…" Jon swallows thickly. "And – and Tim, finding the fire extinguishers, and coming back to help Martin and me, because he… he was brave, and he wouldn't abandon us. And Martin, being… well, being *Martin.* Making the fear bearable, because that's just… how he is, isn't it?" His fond chuckle dies in his throat, choked with dirt and persistent, unshed tears. "Caring, stubbornly *caring,* even when we were both about to die, even though I'd done nothing to deserve his consideration."

The squeeze opens up a bit, allowing Jon to draw in a shallow breath. The air is stale, humid, and saturated with dust, but at least it lets him exercise his lungs a little.

"An-anyway – Jonah, ah, he was watching the whole time. Deliberately waited to activate the sprinkler system until the worms had…" Jon shudders, trying to ignore the way his scars begin to itch and crawl. "And Tim – he got caught up in it too, just because – because he was too close to me at the wrong time. I guess that – that never stopped being true, did it?

"The next few marks were… well, I couldn't have made it any easier for Jonah." Jon laughs, a bitter wheeze of a thing. "I just *had* to go looking for answers. *Stupid.* All he had to do is leave me a few pertinent statements and watch as I walked right into the Vast and the Desolation…"

"You've got to be kidding me," Martin says flatly.

"Not at all."

"Time travel."

"Yep."

"Actual, legitimate time travel."

“I don’t know what distinguishes legitimate time travel from illegitimate” – Martin rolls his eyes – “but sure?”

“How?”

“Not entirely sure? Jon’s had trouble going into detail given… you know, his current limitations. Something about a wormhole in a spooky house?” Georgie frowns. “And he mentioned spiders offhand once, but I still don’t know whether he meant it literally or metaphorically.”

Martin doesn’t reply to that. He paces, paces, paces in short, erratic bursts. The hand not holding the letter curls into a fist, fingernails cutting into his palm.

“Tell me what’s on your mind,” Georgie ventures.

“I… I don’t know,” Martin answers truthfully. “It’s just – a lot. Elias is Jonah Magnus, and – and he forced Jon to…”

He stops his pacing and unclenches his fist, only for his fingers to begin twitching and flexing, as if itching for something to wring or throttle or crush. The pounding in his ears nearly drowns out his own noisy breathing, and he has to take a minute to relax his jaw before he speaks.

“How… how is he?” He manages to keep his voice remarkably calm, considering the crackling, pent-up energy roiling within him.

“Handling it better than I would have expected, honestly? Don’t get me wrong, he’s… traumatized. Guilty. Keeps referring to himself as a monster, and I don’t think that’s because he doesn’t have any better words to use. Still not taking care of himself as much as I would like, but… for once, I don’t think he’s just being careless? It’s more like… I don’t know.” Georgie leans forward with her elbows on her knees, hands clasped together in front of her mouth and gaze fixed on the floor. “He’s afraid to sleep, afraid to read statements – which I guess is like eating for him now? It’s like he has to choose between neglecting a basic need

and fulfilling it at the cost of triggering a panic attack. It's not a fair choice to ask him to make, and it would be unfair for me to hold that against him."

"None of that sounds like 'handling it.'"

"Except he's not just giving in to despair, and for once he's not going it alone. He's actually asking for help, and *accepting* it when it's offered." She straightens in her seat again, and Martin resolutely ignores the pointed look she gives him. "He's been openly communicating – not just about the facts, but about his own feelings."

"Not enough to keep him from taking it upon himself to – to bury himself alive, apparently. And for a person who tried to slit his throat and – and leave him to… you know, if Basira hadn't stepped in, I – *we* never would have known what happened to him."

Martin thinks back to the day Jane Prentiss attacked the Institute.

I don't want to become a mystery, Jon had said. *I refuse to become another goddamn mystery.*

That was the first time he had really seen Jon with his guard down. Martin remembers every detail: the tone of his voice, the set of his jaw, the thinly veiled desperation in his eyes when he finally offered Martin a candid glimpse of what lives behind all those obdurate walls he hides behind…

Because I'm scared, Martin!

So much about Jonathan Sims had made sense after that.

"Well," Georgie says, "he trusted us enough to tell us where he was going this time."

"And you *let him go?"* Martin says, far more vehemently than he had intended.

“First off, there’s no *letting* him do anything,” Georgie says sternly. “He’s an adult; I can’t control him. It’s not my *job* to control him. But yes,” she continues after a pause, softer now, “he explained the situation and I told him I’d support him.”

“Why?”

“Because he said he knew what he was doing.”

“And you actually believed him?”

“Yes. Because I really do think he’s changed. He promised me that this isn’t more of the same, and I believe him.” Georgie shrugs. “Also, he’s from the future and he’s done this once already. Though by his own admission, last time he *didn’t* give anyone else a chance to weigh in.” Staring at Martin intently, she leans forward again. He takes an automatic step back, as if pushed. “He’s trying to do better. I think he deserves a chance to prove it – maybe to himself more than anyone else.”

“I’m not saying he doesn’t–”

“Then sit back down and read the rest.”

He doesn’t sit, but he does return to the letter. And it’s… well, he doesn’t know what to make of it.

Jon knows about the Extinction. He knows that Martin is cooperating with Peter partly to protect him. He knows that Peter’s plans involve Martin’s isolation.

None of that is surprising, if Jon actually is from the future. He seems confident that the Extinction isn’t as imminent a threat as Peter claims, so if Jon *does* have future knowledge, then… Martin might have to reevaluate some things.

Despite the weight of that revelation, it isn't what's dominating the forefront of Martin's mind right this moment. What's tripping him up right now is…

He deserved to–

–to be – beloved–

–cared for – trusted–

–being wanted and appreciated–

–being genuinely loved–

–no matter how wrong it might feel–

–when you're at your lowest point, when you're your most emotionally vulnerable.

I need him to be okay–

–and the world is so much better for–

–the easy, charming man I'd fall in love with–

–being in it.

Almost sedately, in stark contrast to his earlier burst of manic energy, Martin finally lowers himself into the nearest chair. It's only later that he'll realize that he didn't pause beforehand to assess which seating option offered the furthest physical distance from Georgie.

"You're… *sure* Jon wrote this?" he says meekly.

Georgie sighs heavily, but when she rolls her eyes, it's with amused exasperation rather than true annoyance.

"Like I said the last eleven times you asked, *yes.* They aren't *his* words exactly, but the meaning behind them is his. And I don't think it was the apocalypse that made him so sentimental." Martin gives her a bemused look, and she sighs again. "It was *you,* okay? And

it started way before whatever happened in his future. He was besotted when he was staying with me last year, even if he didn't realize it for what it was. And he might be clumsy at expressing it, but… you know as well as I do that he overthinks *everything*, and I don't think that's changed any. If he was confident enough to say all those things, he means it."

"It's just…" Martin trails off, gesturing vaguely with one hand. It isn't impossible for him to conceptualize of Jon as someone capable of love. The impossible part is that… "It's *me*, you know?"

"Yeah, and so does Jon, and it seems he likes you as you are." She waits for Martin to look up before she continues. "I won't tell you what to do with that information. I think he would agree with me when I say that you aren't obligated to reciprocate. But I will tell you that he had the exact same reaction to *you* caring about *him.* Regardless of how you see yourselves, neither of you seems to think that the other is unlovable."

Martin… doesn't know what to say to that. It's too much, too fast, too unexpected – too unbelievable.

"Did he, ah…" The Lonely kicks up a furious objection, but Martin forces himself to ask the question. "Did he say how long he would be gone?"

Yet again, Jon is pinned, panting and shaky from the exertion of struggling fruitlessly for… well, he isn't sure how long he's been stuck. He isn't even sure how long he's been in the Coffin. He managed to dodge giving a specific timeline for when to expect him back – he didn't want to worry anyone if he missed a deadline – but he did insinuate that it shouldn't take more than a week. Secretly, he hoped he could return more quickly than he did the last time.

As expected, though, he has no sense of the passing of time in here, beyond just *too long.* Too long without air, too long without stretching, too long without *Seeing*–

That familiar rumbling is starting up again, distant at first but moving closer, closer, *closer* like an oncoming freight train, volume climbing louder and louder until the entire earth is

roaring. The walls contract abruptly with an earsplitting *crack,* punching the scant amount of air in his lungs out in a wracking wheeze. From all around him come the grunts and groans and yelps of pain from who knows how many fellow trapped souls, but there is one cry in particular that draws his attention.

"Daisy?" His hoarse voice cracks, and he clears his throat before trying again. "Daisy!"

"Jon!"

Chapter End Notes

- Sorry for the delay!! Last week was very busy for me; I didn't have much time for writing.

- Citations are as follows:
Section 1: The 'we need you' bits are from Martin's dialogue in the S4 trailer. The 'Were I prone to flights of fancy…' line is from MAG 007.
Section 2: Excerpts of Daisy's statement are from MAG 061.
Section 3: None.
Section 4: Jon/the Archive's dialogue comes from the following episodes, in order: 015, 166, 015, 166.
Sections 5 & 6: None.
Section 7: See last chapter for citations for Jon's letter to Martin.
Section 8: Jon quotes are from MAG 039; see last chapter for citations for the letter excerpts.
Section 9: None.

- Also,,, my ace/aro-spec ass is *not* a poet, and I wasn't going to embarrass myself by attempting to write a love poem. Just pretend it's affecting, S1-S2-era awkward Martin yearning, complete with that very relatable experience of *reading your past writing and cringing because oh, god, the mortifying ordeal of confronting the person you were a minute ago, let alone years ago.*

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

Center

Chapter Summary

In which Jon reunites with Daisy.

Chapter Notes

This chapter came out to 11k words because any time I try to write Jon and Daisy it ends up being twice as long as I originally intended??? Also, fair warning, it's VERY dialogue heavy. Navel Gazing is one of like two hobbies you're allowed to have in the Buried. (The other is Freaking Out.)

CWs for Chapter 13: all the usual Buried-related warnings apply (claustrophobia, inability to breathe, etc.); panic/anxiety symptoms; just a smidgen of internalized aphobia; brief mention of past passive suicidal ideation; internalized victim blaming; canon-typical trauma (including discussion of victims targeted by the Fears as children).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The darkness and overwhelming pressure of the Buried make it nigh impossible to orient oneself. The only conceivable directions are *forward, down, into, deeper.* Jon's only choice, when he has one at all, is to keep moving – and so he does, digging and clawing his way through the muck, making a transient pathway for himself as best he can.

"Daisy?" It comes out as a rasp. He tries to swallow, but succeeds only in upsetting his already-sore throat. It feels as though the dirt and debris have taken up permanent residence there, clogging his airway just enough to leave him chronically short of breath without cutting off his oxygen supply entirely. "Daisy, can you reach me?"

"Jon," comes the weak reply, "I'm – I don't know where – I c-can't – can't *see*–"

"I hear you," Jon says. "I'm here; I'm coming to you. Just – keep talking, and–"

As he talks, he inhales a cloud of dust, dissolving into wracking coughs.

“Jon? Jon, are you still there?” For a long moment, Jon cannot speak. Daisy’s next words are steeped in panic. “Where are you? I can’t… p-please be there, please–”

“I’m still here,” Jon forces out hoarsely, stretching his arm forward as far as it will go. “I’m not going anywhere. Follow my voice, I – I think I’m almost–”

Chill fingertips brush against his, and he throws his weight forward as much as possible. He hooks her fingers in his and *pulls,* and with a burst of energy he manages to clasp her clammy hand in his.

“There you are,” he says, smiling weakly.

“You’re real,” Daisy says in disbelief, crushing his hand in a bruising grip. “You’re *real.*”

“I am.” He intertwines their fingers, as grateful as she is for a hand to hold. “I’m here, Daisy.”

“Daisy,” she says dreamily. “Yeah. Daisy. That’s me.” A pause. “Just – just me.”

Jon closes his eyes with a relieved sigh. There are no signs that the Hunt still has its claws in her. He had no reason to think that reaching her a couple weeks earlier than before would change anything, but there was still that nagging doubt.

“J-just me,” she says again, but this time there’s a waver in her voice. “Just – *alone*–”

“No,” Jon says hurriedly, squeezing her hand several times in quick succession, “not – not alone. Not anymore.”

“Yeah.” She grasps his hand even more tightly, as if to reassure herself.

“I’m here.”

“Yeah,” she says again, and this time it sounds like she’s starting to believe it.

“How – how are you?” Jon cringes. It’s as stupid a question now as it was the last time. More so, seeing as he’s already heard the answer. “S-sorry. That’s – probably obvious.”

Daisy answers anyway, likely glad of the chance to talk to someone else after so long in isolation.

“I – I can’t move, can’t breathe, can’t…” She trails off, hesitating. “But it’s… it’s quiet here? I can’t…”

She seems to be struggling to find the words.

“You can’t feel the blood,” he supplies.

“Y-yeah. How did you…”

“I can’t feel the Eye, either. It’s… it’s just me. All me.”

“Where are we?”

“In the Coffin. The Buried. It’s… the powers don’t have much sway within one another’s domains. The Hunt, the Eye – they can’t reach us here.”

“The Hunt,” she echoes.

“Yes. You’re a Hunter.”

“I… I guess I was. But – not here.”

No, not here. But once they leave here…

Stop, he tells himself. *One thing at a time. Escape the Buried, then worry about the Hunt.*

“Come on.” He tugs on her hand. “Let’s get you out of here.”

“Can’t – can’t move, and – and even if I could, there’s no way out–”

“No, I – I can get us out. I have a plan.”

“Is this like all your *other* plans?”

Jon chuckles, but it comes out as a wheeze.

“Yes and no. But – but don’t worry, it’s – I can do this. I just – need to – to find it.”

But when he closes his eyes and concentrates, there’s… nothing there.

“Come on,” he says under his breath, keeping his voice deliberately calm. “Come on, where are you?”

There's nothing there. *Why is there nothing there?*

"Just need to… need to focus. Just – focus, think of…"

Think of Martin. Martin is your anchor. Clever, brave, loyal, compassionate Martin.

He was kind to you even when you didn't deserve it; he cared for you even though you did everything you could to push him away. He reached out to you through the Lonely when you were at your most monstrous to remind you of the humanity you'd thought you lost. He made you want to do better, to be the person that he saw when he looked at you.

You followed him into the Lonely because you love him and because he deserved to know it. You need to return to him now, because this version of him doesn't yet know that he is loved. If you don't get back to him, if you don't reach out to him – he'll get lost, and he–

Jon's breath hitches. The fear is starting to move in as inexorably as the earth surrounding them, settling cold and heavy in his gut.

Stop that, he tells himself. *Just think about* Martin*, not the worst-case scenario.*

Everyone underestimates him, because he spent his entire life striving for the perfect balance between useful and unobtrusive. But he's not helpless; he's not a pushover. He took master manipulator Jonah Magnus by surprise; he fooled Peter Lukas for months. Sometimes, you think that Martin Blackwood could outmaneuver the Web if he cared to. If anyone could, it would be him. You don't think you'll ever fully forgive yourself for taking so long to notice.

No, Jon tells himself once more, recognizing the warning signs of a guilt spiral. *That won't help. Redirect.*

In those early days after the ritual, you briefly defaulted to your old habits, withdrawing and shutting him out. He stood up to your brooding, gave your self-loathing no refuge in which to thrive, because he saw right through your sharp tongue to the vulnerable parts of you that it was meant to hide.

He is intuitive, stubborn, and patient in the best of ways.

You have a tendency to stare. You always have; you typically don't notice you're doing it. After you became the Archivist, it went from being an awkward habit to evidence of your inhumanity: all eyes, always watching, always demanding more, more, more until every secret is exposed and any semblance of privacy has been demolished.

But it was never just the Eye urging you to record things. You know from experience that nothing lasts forever, that anyone and anything can disappear without a moment's notice – sometimes leaving no trace, no memory that they ever existed. It only makes sense that you would develop a compulsion to document everything for posterity. The tape recorders were only the most recent manifestation of that preexisting obsession. Before that, you made lists, you took pictures, you wrote on your hands – and, of course, you stared.

During your first few days together at the safehouse, Martin called attention to the staring. You were mortified, launched into a rambling apology – but he shut it down, reassured you that he was only teasing, that he didn't mind it, that it was… endearing, in a way. And once you were given permission, you began to consciously catalog every little detail.

He has thirty-six freckles on his face, seventeen on his hands, and constellations of them besides: on his back, on his shoulders, on his arms, on his belly. He blushes easily, and you love it, because you've never been good at reading body language, and you can always use a hint. His hair is soft, and the way he leans into it when you run your fingers through it – you think he would purr if he could. You were hesitant, at first, to spend too long looking at his eyes – but unlike most people, he showed no signs that he found eye contact with you unsettling.

You gave him permission to stare, too. And he did. He never shied away from your scars. He liked looking at you – and you knew he was genuine when he said so, even though you didn't understand it.

Martin is self-conscious about his size, painfully aware of how others see him. He rarely stands to his full height, tending to curl his shoulders in, maintain a curve to his spine, keep his arms pulled tight to his body: anything to avoid towering over others, anything to take up as little space as possible. He saw his stretch marks as flaws to be tolerated at best; spent most of his life assuming that his weight and soft edges made him unattractive.

There are so many things he hates about himself. It broke your heart a little, to see how difficult it was for him to believe that you like looking at him, that your boundaries regarding physical intimacy weren't a comment on his desirability. (Though he never voiced that last concern, never wanted his own insecurities to make you feel self-conscious about that part of yourself. Never made you feel guilty or lacking or… or broken.)

You regularly stole his jumpers; the first time you did it, he went speechless and flustered at the casual domesticity of it all. You took turns ambushing one another with affirmations and small acts of affection like that. It became something of a challenge, a game: springing a pet name on one another here, placing a soft kiss on a hand there, delighting in the reactions it got. It's strange how easily you settled into that routine, how natural it felt to let down your guard.

At night, he would curl around you like he belonged there, like there was no place he'd rather be – and it made you feel like you belonged, too. The first time he held you in his arms, you realized that you'd never truly known what it was to feel safe until that moment – and isn't that its own special kind of vulnerability, isn't it such a cliché? You still had nightmares, still jolted awake several times throughout the night frantic and disorientated – as did he – but it felt so much more endurable with someone to coax you back to reality.

When you first led him out of the Lonely, it was still clinging to him. He couldn't understand what you saw in him, any more than you could understand what he saw in you. You made it your mission to make him understand. And eventually, he did. It wasn't the first time you told him you loved him, but one morning when you said it, he looked at you and his lips parted ever so slightly, and you could practically see *the epiphany dawn in his eyes, and he whispered that he believed you.*

You still haven't found a word that accurately describes what you felt then. You kissed him, and hoped that it would say what words could not.

You never gave up on each other, even when you'd given up on your own selves. He never stopped caring for you, even when you were at your most fearsome and fearful. Despite everything, you communicated, you compromised, you comforted one another. You never stopped loving one another.

You lost him once before. You cannot lose him again. You need to find him. Why – why can't you find him? Why can't you feel him?

Jon feels his breath quickening, terror needling at the edges of his mind. He jumps slightly when Daisy speaks.

"Jon?"

"It's – it's okay," he says, his voice shaky. "I've – I've done this once before. I can do this."

There's no rule saying he can only have one anchor, right?

He thinks of Georgie.

She took you in when you had nowhere else to go, even though you hadn't spoken in years, even though you hadn't parted on the best of terms. Staying with her felt more like home than you'd experienced in… you don't know how long. It made you realize how much you missed her – her humor, her ingenuity, her confidence, her tenacity, her generosity, and, yes, even her perceptiveness, daunting though it may be at times. She speaks her mind and you can take her at her word. You can appreciate that, as someone who has always had trouble parsing the implicit and unspoken aspects of social life.

You trust her judgment, and she believes in you, and it makes you want to believe in yourself. You want to be there for her in the same way that she's chosen to be there for you.

He thinks of Melanie.

You disliked one another at first meeting, even though – or perhaps because – you have so much in common. Over the years, you saw more sides to her. She's brave and resolute, not just when it comes to fighting back, but when it comes to making the conscious decision to heal. She's capable of kindness to those who are receptive to it. You've seen how she is with Georgie, how her hard edges relax, how her devotion is as fierce as her anger can be – perhaps more so.

You know that she never deserved to suffer like she has. You know she deserves a happy ending. You want to try to reconcile with her. In your future, she went so far as to suggest that you could be friends. You think you would like that.

He thinks of Basira.

She's had no one but herself to rely on for months. She feels trapped and alone; she hasn't had a moment to grieve; she's forced herself to compartmentalize and detach because if she breaks down, she doesn't know if she'll be able to put herself back together again. She's told herself that her own comfort and wellbeing don't matter. She has a job to do and she's the only one left who is willing and able to do it. The only solid thing left in her life, the only thing giving her purpose is the mission. The mission is her anchor, because she's lost everything else.

When she found out that Daisy was alive, she was almost angry with you for making her dare to hope. You promised that you would bring Daisy home to her, and you mean to keep that promise.

And Jon has a job to do, too, doesn't he?

You need to stop Jonah Magnus, you need to–

His stomach clenches as the dread grips him.

Okay, no. Don't – don't think of Jonah. Not helpful, not helpful, not–

He reaches further. He tries to think of Naomi, of the Admiral, of–

The faraway rumbling starts up again.

"Jon," Daisy says again, urgently, perched on the edge of panic right along with him.

This is forever deep below creation, some self-sabotaging part of his brain reminds him. *Where the weight of existence bears down. This is the Buried, and we are alive. There isn't even an up–*

"I just – I just – I just need to calm down," he stammers. He can feel his pulse beating in his throat; would be hyperventilating if he could breathe at all. "I – I can't think straight, and I just need to…"

He thinks back to the physical details of the world just outside the Coffin.

The arrangement of the tapes–

…CASE #0160919 sits 34.2 centimeters west of the Coffin, turned at a 45-degree angle. Approximately 20.6 centimeters south-southwest is CASE #0172904; the casing of its recorder is slightly cracked at the lower left corner. 2.4 centimeters to its right is CASE #0171302; the rewind button on the recorder housing it tends to stick…

–on the floor of his office–

…where fingernail scratches are still visible in the northwest corner of the room, left there by Enrique MacMillan on 4 November, 2003, after he gave his statement regarding his encounter with a Buried-touched Leitner…

–and the tape he left on his desk–

...on top of a softcover Moleskine notebook – black, 12.7 by 21 centimeters, ruled – belonging to Martin Blackwood; the Archivist knows every word written thus far on the 68 used out of 192 total pages within…

–and on that tape are pleas that went unanswered for far too long, laced with desperation and grief and rapidly dwindling hope–

…We really need you, Jon. We – I need you …

–but Jon cannot hear it anymore.

His mind wanders to the single folded sheet of paper tucked away in the top drawer of his desk. A second message for Martin, to be read only in the event that Jon doesn't return. A transcript, to be precise.

On their way to the Panopticon, they had been separated when they traversed the Lonely's domain. Jon had searched frantically, resisting the urge to simply Know because he had *promised.* As much as he wanted to, he didn't feel right forcing Martin to See him the way he did before. It was Martin's domain, and he had the right to decide for himself whether to leave it behind. Even if Jon had wanted to, he suspected that he wouldn't have been able to actually find Martin this time unless he wanted to be found. In the end, he did.

Just before Jon found him, he managed to catch the tail end of Martin's statement. Naturally, the Archive memorized every word and dutifully filed it away without any conscious effort or consent on Jon's part.

…I am Martin Blackwood, and I am not Lonely anymore; I am not Lonely anymore. I want to have friends. I – no, I have friends. I'm in love. I am in love, and I will not forget that; I will not forget…

Before he entered the Coffin, Jon copied it down and left it behind. Just in case. Just in case something goes wrong. If he goes missing in action for too long, he trusts that eventually someone will clear out his desk, find it, and hopefully pass it along to its intended recipient.

It was a last-ditch effort to impart the truth: that a future exists wherein Martin isn't Lonely; that he can be and is and deserves to be cared for; that it isn't just an unattainable fantasy. And, most importantly, Jon is not the only one who can provide that, nor is Jon alone enough to fulfill that need. In the end, Martin *chose* to turn his back on the Lonely. He can do it again.

There's every chance that it was a useless gesture, but Jon doesn't think he could live with himself if he didn't at least *try* – and if he *does* get lost down here, he'll be forced to live with himself for as long as the Buried itself exists.

But Jon doesn't *want* to leave Martin alone with that inexplicable scrap of statement, hoping that it's enough to get the point across. Jon has to get home. He *has* to; there's no other choice–

"Jon?" Daisy says again. "You sound like you're… what – what's wrong?"

"Sorry, I'm – I'm just… I can't – I can't feel my anchor."

"Anchor?"

"Y-yeah. Something to ground me, help me feel the way out. It's – there's a void where it should be, and…" His short exhale shudders on the way out. "I think – I think we might be here for a while longer."

"N-not alone, though," Daisy says, almost questioningly.

"No. No, not alone. And – and I can still get us out, I think," Jon adds hurriedly. "I just – I need to… I need to come down from the panic, and it's hard to do that when I can't – I can't

breathe–"

His breath catches and he closes his eyes. *Stop,* he tells himself, *you're – you're spiraling, talking yourself into a panic. Just… listen – listen to the quiet.*

"Jon?"

"Still – still here," he says, squeezing her hand again. "I'm not going anywhere without you, I promise."

"Do you – if you need a break from – from whatever you're doing…" She falters for a moment before blurting out: "C-can we… can we talk? I haven't – I just want someone to hear me."

"Of course. I'm listening." When Daisy doesn't reply, he offers a gentle prompting. "Daisy?"

"I'm – it's difficult. I can't find the words."

"Would it help if I… ask?" The last time, it did help her get her thoughts out.

"Y-yeah," she says with only a slight delay. "Do your… thing."

"Right," he says. For a moment, he worries that he'll have difficulty concentrating long enough to compel an answer, but his mind clears almost as soon as he opens his mouth. *Of course.* **"How are you feeling?"**

The question buzzes like static on his tongue on its way out.

"S-scared. I – I'm – I'm s-scared…"

Daisy's words do not deviate from the last time he was here, but he does not interrupt her as she speaks. He latches onto her voice, focuses all of his attention on her story, and tries to ground himself in the present.

"Y-you know what I thought, when I woke up here? I thought this was *hell*. I – I was dead, and I was in hell. And I - I knew I deserved it." Daisy stifles a sob as she nears the end of her statement. "I don't want t-to b-be a s-sadistic predator again. I – I don't want to hobble around like some – pathetic wounded prey here. I don't know which would be worse. But I'm scared now – that I won't ever get the choice."

One thing I've learned, Daisy, is that we all get a choice, he told her last time. *Even if it doesn't feel like one.*

Now, he's not so sure. Or, rather, now he thinks it isn't *quite* that simple.

"It's… complicated," Jon starts slowly. "Choice, I mean. We all have choices, but – but when all the alternatives are unendurable, or impossible to achieve, or – or even *conceptualize,* then… it's not a fair choice, is it? Sometimes because that's just – how it is, and sometimes by design. There – there are people, and – and *things* out there that will abuse their power to deceive you, keep you ignorant about things that would affect your decisions. Or – or convince you that you *have* no options, no autonomy – or even that you can't trust your own judgment, your own senses. Some choices can hardly be called *choices* at all."

He begins to grind his teeth as he considers his next words, but stops as soon as he feels the grit between his molars when he bites down. There are a lot of things to hate about the Buried, but its refusal to allow him to engage in any of his usual nervous habits definitely adds insult to injury.

"You say you deserve to be here, but – do you think you deserved to be marked by the Hunt to begin with? Because one thing I've learned is… most people who become Avatars – we don't necessarily do anything to *deserve* the attention of the things that take notice of us. To be put in these positions, to be given impossible choices about – about things we have no right to decide in the first place."

“What do you mean?”

“It seems that a common thread is… well, um, I think Tim hit the nail on the head, actually? In his testament before the Unknowing, he – he said, ‘The only thing you need to have your life destroyed by this stuff is just bad luck. Talk to the wrong person, take the wrong train, open the wrong door, and that’s it.’”

“You remember that verbatim?”

“It’s – it’s an Archivist thing.” Well, technically. Jon can’t access the Archive at present, but some statements have looped so many times in his head that he has every word memorized by now. “The point is that our transgressions, they… the punishment often doesn’t seem to fit the crime.”

Daisy is quiet, so Jon continues.

“Uh, Jane Prentiss, for instance – stumbled upon a wasps’ nest in her attic, and then the Corruption infested her. In her original statement, she was *afraid* of what was happening to her, she was asking for help, but it… it was slowly hollowing her out. Appealed to her insecurities, whispered to her that it was the only thing that could love her, that wouldn’t abandon her. Maybe eventually she embraced it on her own, but at that point, how much of her was left to make that choice?

“And – and Michael Crew. He was struck by lightning when he was eight. The Spiral never stopped stalking him after that. He spent his childhood in fear, obsessively sought out information about – lightning, and fractals, because understanding it felt like the only way to resist a thing that feeds on uncertainty.”

Jon can relate to *that,* can’t he? He was always curious, but his desire to know and understand things became more obsessive after he encountered his first monster – as if he could solve any problem if only he learned enough about it. But it was never enough, and that impulse never actually kept him *safe.* It only offered him a flimsy illusion of control, which was something he desperately needed after the Web showed him what it was like to have none. Still, an ineffective coping mechanism was better than not coping at all – or so he told himself then.

“When he realized that there was no escape from the supernatural once he’d been marked by it,” Jon continues, “he decided that the next best thing was choosing *which* Fear to submit to – to serve. Went looking for Leitners until he found the Vast, and… it offered him safety. The most basic of human needs, something he hadn’t known since he was a child. The things he did to feed his patron were – indefensible, but I can’t help thinking about the person he might have been, if the Spiral hadn’t come into his life. He… he was only *eight.* How is a child supposed to process something that even an adult would have trouble coping with? I’m sure many children don’t even physically *survive* an encounter with one of the Fears, but even those that do… they never actually *escape*, do they?”

Daisy makes an indistinct little noise in her throat. Jon can’t Know for certain, but he imagines she’s thinking of her own first encounter with the Hunt. When enough time has passed that she doesn’t seem ready to say as much, Jon continues.

“And there’s – there’s Oliver Banks, he’s an Avatar of the End. He just started having dreams one day, became a death prophet. As far as I can tell, nothing provoked it. It just… happened. Early on, he tried to use that ability to help people, but… the powers granted us as Avatars, they aren’t for helping or saving anyone. When you realize that, after a long string of failures, you start to become… despondent. Numb, even. Maybe some misstep along the way piqued the End’s interest in him, or maybe it was completely arbitrary. I don’t know. I don’t know that Oliver does, either.”

It’s difficult to speak at length here, and Jon’s speech is punctuated by frequent gasps and stops and starts, but he plows ahead. Granted, he’s always had a tendency toward intense, rapid-fire speech whenever he gets invested in a topic of interest, but it’s also that he needs to cover as much ground as he can as quickly as possible. There’s no telling when the Buried will constrict again. Sometimes there are long intervals of relative peace; other times, the bouts of crushing pressure come one after the other in a barrage. The inconsistency makes the dread all the more potent: he can never predict when the walls will close in.

“And Helen,” he says, moving right along. “Before she became the Distortion, she opened a door. That’s all. Most people would have probably done the same. A door that wasn’t there before, that *can’t* be there – of course the human mind wants to test its perceptions, make sense of the discrepancy. Which is exactly what the Distortion preys on. It *let* her escape its corridors, because it would make the fear that much more potent when it came for her again, when she realized that it had never actually let her go, that there was never any way to escape. It was… it was just playing with its food.”

Like with Benjamin Hatendi, Jon thinks. ‘*The blanket never did anything.’*

The Fears are never merciful. For an earthly predatory animal, the pain and fear of the prey are only relevant insofar as their utility in capturing it. Granted, the majority of animals may have no qualms about eating their prey alive so long as it's incapacitated, no concept of putting their food out of its misery – but still, sustenance isn't derived from the *experience* of the prey, only from its organic matter.

For the Powers, though… terror *is* the food source. If anything, the misery is *deliberately* drawn out. The suffering is primary to the meal.

"I still don't know how much of Helen Richardson was *left* by the time she embraced her new existence and began feeding" – *by the time she chose to stop feeling guilty,* Jon notes privately – "but she never asked to be in that position to begin with. She just… opened a door.

"And then… you, with the Hunt. I did hear the tape – of your interrogation with Elias. All you did was trespass on a childhood dare, right? You and Calvin Benchley. Maybe the Hunt chose the both of you, was deliberately waiting for you there. Or maybe you were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Either way, you… you did something that most children do at one point or another, exploring out of bounds – I did plenty of that myself. And – and you'd done the same thing many times in the past, there was no reason to think that things would go any differently. But that time, *that* time you stumbled into something that most children – most *people* never do."

Jon debates whether or not to share his own initiation into this world. He never told Daisy about it last time, but he knows – and Knows – about her childhood encounter. It seems only fair to include his own.

"Actually, I… I had a similar experience, when I was eight," he admits, pushing through his habitual reservations. "Except I was… more of an active participant in what happened to me. There's no way Michael Crew could have dodged a lightning strike, but me – I… I opened a book I shouldn't have, knocked on a door I shouldn't have. I could've just… *not."*

"That's a funny double standard," Daisy says flatly.

"P-pardon?"

“Couldn’t you just as easily say that Crew could have *chosen* to not stand outside during a lightning storm?”

“He – he actually wanted to go inside, but his friend pressured him to keep playing,” Jon says, almost defensively. “By the time they decided to go in, it was too late.”

“Like I pressured Calvin.”

“That’s–” Jon gives an agitated little exhale. “It’s still different.”

“How?”

“Did you have a bad feeling about the dare, or was it just like any other day? You had no reason to think that things would go wrong. I… I *knew* that book was wrong, and I opened it anyway.” Daisy scoffs. “What?”

“Has anyone ever pointed out to you that you’re capable of some truly *infuriating* mental gymnastics?”

Jon puffs out another exasperated breath before muttering, “Yes.”

In fact, she said almost the exact same thing to him the last time around. And Georgie – she used to say so all the time, especially when they were dating.

You always do this, she’d pointed out once during an argument, hands on her hips and a shrewd look in her eye. *Any time a conversation gets a little too uncomfortable for you, you just – throw your hands up, say it’s your fault and shut down, and nothing ever gets resolved. Why are you always so eager to take the blame? Is it that it’s better than admitting there are some things you can’t control, or is it just easier than actually talking about your feelings?*

The answer was *yes* on both counts, and he had been angry with her for putting it into words. He'd already known on some level, but he studiously avoided that sort of introspection. Now that it had been verbalized, the knowledge would always *be* there, floating around in his mind – yet another thing to overanalyze, to obsess over, to ambush him in moments of doubt.

Since then he's gotten better at communicating in healthy ways, but the self-blame thing… well, Martin still had to periodically call him out on it, right up until the end. It became a common refrain: *It's still victim blaming even if* you're *the victim, Jon.* The reminder *did* help – at least some of the time – but it wasn't enough to undo a worldview that he'd spent his entire life internalizing.

"Yes," he says again, less sullenly now, "I – I see your point."

"Good. So – evil book?"

"A Leitner, yes. The Web." Jon has no desire to go into all the gruesome details, not when he's – when they're *both* already being suffocated by fear. "And I only escaped through… I don't know, some combination of mundane human cruelty and luck – or… or someone else's misfortune, more like." He gives a tired sigh. *"Or* it could have been deliberate interference by the Web, taking someone else in my place because it had other plans for me. I'll never know the exact reason why. If there even is a reason."

He pauses, expecting the Beholding's characteristic objection to the idea that he should accept *not knowing* anything, before remembering with grim satisfaction that the Eye can't quite reach him here. Nor can the Web, for that matter. A small mercy, but he'll take it.

"But the experience led to an obsession with the supernatural. I suppose I thought that if – if I could just *understand* it, I could conquer the fear. It didn't work, but an obsession like that – it persists regardless of whether it's successful or productive or – or healthy. Eventually it led me to the Institute. Which led me… here, ultimately." He bites his lower lip as he considers his next words. "I'm sure many of my choices along the way were mine alone, and – and I'm responsible for my actions regardless. But that first domino… it was just a restless child ignoring gut instinct, all because he needed to *know."*

"Jon," Daisy says, the hint of a warning growl underlying her tone.

“I – okay, yes, I know, I know. Double standards.” He takes a shallow breath before continuing. “My *point* is, most of us are just… *unlucky* isn’t the right word, but it’s as close as I can get. Sometimes the Fears seem to seek out victims who are already uniquely susceptible to them – people with phobias, or specific traumas. Other times it seems… arbitrary. And sometimes it seems like the difference between an average victim and those who eventually become Avatars is… compatibility, or – or in some cases, a sense of kinship, even.

“I’ve always been too curious for my own good, a natural fit for the Beholding. Jane talked about being seen as toxic, and it was the Corruption that found her. Annabelle Cane said she was well-versed in manipulation as a young child, the sort of gift that the Web favors. Jared Hopworth always had a sadistic streak, but the difference between him and any other bully is that he found *The Boneturner's Tale*. I… don’t really know what to make of Jude Perry. The way she told it, she always had the disposition for the Desolation. She would likely have been a nightmare with or without supernatural help, but there are plenty of people like that in the world. She just happened to be one of the few who caught the attention of the Lightless Flame.

“But – but I also don’t think preexisting compatibility is a *requirement* to be an Avatar. Some people really do just – stumble into it, probably. Grow into it, maybe, after enough exposure. Especially if the same Power keeps coming back.”

Jon can’t help thinking of the Distortion and its tendency to dog its victims for years. Helen said once that she couldn’t just force her victims into her corridors, that they had to open the door on their own. But that was a lie, wasn’t it? Marcus MacKenzie refused to open the door every single time it appeared throughout his childhood and young adulthood. It started to take increasingly drastic measures: disguising itself as other things, at one point even opening up in the ground in front of him, hoping he wouldn’t notice until he already stepped over the ledge and gravity did its work, like a bear trap materializing beneath a boot in the blink between one footfall and the next. When that didn’t work, it took his father. And then, even after evading it for decades, Helen eventually took Marcus anyway. Choice didn’t come into it. It didn't matter how many times he walked away – it followed him wherever he went.

“Either way,” Jon continues, “whether it’s part of some grand plan or just happenstance, the Avatars… we catch the attention of something predatory, and it sinks its hooks into the vulnerabilities it finds. There are plenty of other people in the world who may have the same… flaws, or inclinations, or experiences, but most are lucky enough not to be drawn into this world. I’m not sure exactly what determines who *is*, but I don’t think it comes down to fairness, or deservedness, or – or some sort of cosmic punishment. I – I don’t think the universe works that way.

“And – and after we’ve been marked, maybe we can make choices along the way. But as far as I can tell, none of those choices ever lead to complete freedom from the Powers that lay

claim to us. We're still accountable for our actions; we can fight back, we can resist – but we'll always be struggling against our natures. Sometimes it seems like there's… there's really no choice we can make where things actually turn out *okay.* Doesn't mean we stop trying, or give up hope, but…" He pauses to gnaw on the inside of his cheek for a few seconds. "It can be hard to ignore the fear when it's become such an intrinsic part of you, is all. When it makes its hunger your own, and hollows you out if you don't feed it. It can make the concept of choice seem… empty."

When he trails off, Daisy blows out a forceful exhale.

"That was… a lot."

"Surprised the Buried let me get it all out," Jon says, a bit sheepishly. "Sorry, I've… had a lot of time alone to ruminate."

"I think I can rela-"

Daisy's words are cut short when all at once the earth crashes down around them, as if exacting payment for the courtesy of staying its hand for so long. An indeterminate amount of time passes, weight pressing down on them from all sides, leaving no room for breath or words or thought. Jon focuses on their hands, still linked tightly together, the only anchor to be found here in the dark.

Eventually, the walls begin to withdraw in tiny increments. The sinister, sibilant shifting of soil is a constant, unknown variable – it sounds the same whether the earth is compacting or moving away, and often there is no way to tell until it's already too close and pressing down. Jon can feel his pulse hammering in his throat; can hear Daisy's gasping breaths overlapping his own.

"I was gonna kill you," she blurts out eventually, breathless and rushed. "You know that?"

"Yes."

“I – I don’t just mean that day in the woods,” she clarifies. “Af-after the mission, I was planning on killing you.”

“I know. You realized I wasn’t human. That I needed to die.”

“H-how did you–”

“I’ve been here once before. And – and I should apologize for the dreams, I–”

“Wait–”

“I know it’s not an excuse, but I never meant to compel you that time – didn’t even realize at the time that that was something I could *do,* and–”

“Jon–”

“I didn’t realize then that the dreams were *real,* and – and when I finally *did*, I still didn’t have any *control* over them, but I–”

“Jon! Shut up a minute.”

His mouth snaps shut a little too quickly and he winces as he bites down on the tip of his tongue. The metallic taste of blood just barely registers on his tongue in the few seconds it takes for the cut to heal.

“Just – back up,” Daisy says, toning down the intensity this time. “That thing you said about… you’ve ‘been here once before’? What is *that* supposed to mean?”

“It’s… a long story. And difficult to believe.”

“Well, it’s–” Daisy huffs. “It’s not like we don’t have the time?”

“I suppose,” Jon sighs. He’s already told this story to the tape recorder at length, but… the idea of telling it to another person, in his own words this time, feels both terrifying and cathartic at the same time. It’s just – difficult to talk about, no matter how many times he recaps it. “Where to begin… oh, I should probably preface this with ‘time travel is real.’”

Daisy sounds far too nonchalant when she says, “Okay.”

“O-okay? That’s… that’s it?”

“Sorry if it’s not the dramatic response you expected. Encounter enough – vampires, and people made of sawdust, and – and *this, here,* and… I don’t know that anything would surprise me anymore.”

“R-right,” Jon replies, still a bit incredulous. “Well, I’m – I’m from the future.” He pauses again, but she doesn’t interject. “And… and I came back to stop the apocalypse.”

His inflection pitches up into a near-question on the last word, certain that *this* will be the point at which Daisy calls bullshit. Instead, she just gives a dry chuckle.

“And how’s *that* going for you?”

“Well, uh, actually…” Jon’s laugh manages to sound slightly hysterical despite its brevity. “Being stuck here actually does – put it on hold indefinitely?”

“H-how’s that?”

“Because – because it can’t go forward without the Archivist.” He takes a shallow breath. “Just like the Stranger has the Unknowing, the Eye has its own Ritual. I was – I *am* a part of it. I – I didn’t want to, Elias – he orchestrated the whole thing, f-forced me to–” He nearly bites his tongue again when he cuts himself off. “But that – that doesn’t change anything,” he continues, almost viciously. “I’m the one who opened the door. It wouldn’t have happened if not for me, s-so it’s as good as my fault.”

“Don’t know about that,” Daisy says.

“What?”

“Don’t think I can see you making a choice to end the world, if you had any say. Doesn’t sound like you. You – Jon, you *just* went on about having choices taken away.” Jon is silent, teeth clenched; Daisy jostles his hand insistently. “So – so how’d it *actually* happen?”

“I, ah…” *Why is this still so hard to talk about?* “So you know how I – I… need the statements?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I – it – my *appetite* only got worse as time went on. Started craving live statements, and – and hunted for them. The others intervened eventually, and I stopped, but I still needed – *need* – statements, or else I’d… starve, for lack of a better word. So I made do with the old statements like before, but they were – less and less filling as time went on, and – and I needed more of them, and more frequently, even though I tried to – to spread them out, ration myself. And, uh, some things happened, and Martin and I went into hiding – used your safehouse, actually–”

“Which one?”

“Scotland.”

“Ah,” Daisy says softly. “I like that one.”

“So did we,” Jon says, smiling fondly. “I – we only had a couple weeks, before… b-but the time we did have, it was…”

He clears his throat.

“An-anyway, I went – hungry, for a bit, until a box of statements could be sent to us. And the *first* one I read, it was – a trap, by J- Elias.” He can explain about Jonah Magnus later. If he takes that detour now, he’ll never get through the rest of this. “The heading looked – just like any other statement. Statement giver’s name, date – but as soon as I started reading, it was Elias’ words. It was a, uh, statement about – about me. About what I am. I’m not just the Archivist, Daisy, I’m the *Archive.*”

“Meaning…?”

“I – when I take or – or consume a statement, I, ah – experience it like I’m there, and it – it becomes a part of me. I’m like a – like a living record, a library of – of people’s worst fears, nightmares, moments that I have no right to witness, and – doesn’t matter. Elias needed a fully realized Archive for his ritual to work, so he – he created one, and he fed it a statement. And I – I tried to stop reading, but I *couldn’t,* even though I – I *tried*, I really did, I–” He laughs nervously. “Even tried to – to blind myself, but it just – *healed*. Then, at the end, there was an – an incantation. To open a door that could let all the Fears into the world. And when I read it… it did.”

“Wait – all of them?”

“Yes. Just before she died, Gertrude figured out that a ritual to bring one of the Fears into the world could never succeed on its own. The Powers can’t exist without minds to experience them, and our minds – they’re highly associative. The experience of fear is just… far more convoluted and subjective than any artificial taxonomy can capture. The Fears have overlap, and – and some of them are defined by their opposition to the others.

“A Vast ritual would collapse without the existence of the Buried, for instance. Or – the Stranger and the Spiral, they’re both tied to unreality, to not being able to trust your perceptions – which can feed into paranoia, which the Eye and the Web *also* thrive on. The Hunt and the Slaughter run together, and the Flesh can tag alongside. Both the Corruption and the Desolation are equally efficient and thorough in ravaging a home or a body or – or even the general *concept* of safety.

“Even here – we’re too far deep below creation for the Eye or the Hunt to reach us, but there’s still more than the Buried to fear. The Dark, for instance, or being Forsaken. Even the Vast can be found down here, if you start obsessing over your own insignificance in the grand scheme of the universe. The Powers are just – too interconnected, and their rituals never accounted for that.”

“So the Unknowing…”

“Would have failed even without our intervention,” Jon says bitterly. “Same goes for all of the rituals that Gertrude stopped, and all the others that have been sabotaged throughout the centuries. All of that sacrifice, and for *nothing*. Michael Shelley, and Jan Kilbride, and – and *Tim,* and you ending up here –”

“Tim?”

“He… he died during the mission,” Jon says quietly. He hears a sharp intake of breath from Daisy.

“And Basira?”

“Alive. She got out before the explosion.” He can just barely make out Daisy’s sigh of relief. “She… she told me to tell you that she’s waiting for you.”

“Oh,” Daisy says softly. “I’m s-”

Before she can say more, the Buried begins to writhe around them again, this time closing in molasses-slow. They both instinctively tighten their handhold on one another. As horrid as the crushing force is, this time it at least has the decency to press them closer together. Daisy's free hand tentatively brushes against Jon's free wrist. Understanding the unspoken request, Jon interlocks their fingers, and they wait.

"S-so," Daisy wheezes when the earth finally relaxes and settles again, "about – about the rituals?"

"R-right." Jon coughs lightly, still catching his breath. "Well, ah, Elias found out about Gertrude's theory. Came up with a – ritual that would bring all the Powers through at once, but with the Eye ruling over the rest. It required an Archivist – Archive – directly marked by all the Powers. Elias – chose me. Made sure I'd encounter each of them, and… when I was ready, he laid one last trap and waited for me to wander in, because he knew from experience that I would."

And it could happen again, Jon's brain helpfully supplies.

"Huh."

"Yeah. S-so it probably goes without saying, but if you thought I wasn't human before, I, ah…" He gives an exhausted, humorless chuckle. "I'm definitely not now."

Daisy is silent for a long moment before saying: "I take it you – you didn't come here the first time."

Jon frowns, puzzled. That wasn't the comment that he had been expecting.

"No, I did."

"Then… how–?"

“I told you, there’s a way out. I just – I just have to find it. Last time I found you, and we escaped together. We can do it again.” She doesn’t respond to that, and he kneads the tops of her hands with his thumbs. “Daisy?”

“You’ve been here once before, and you escaped, and… and you came back?” She says it in such a small voice, it almost doesn’t even sound like her. “After – after seeing what it’s like, you still came back for me?”

“Yes…?”

“Why?” she whispers. “Why do that for me? I – I had a knife to your throat, I would’ve killed you if Basira hadn’t found us first, I saw the fear in your eyes and I *enjoyed* it – *and* you knew that I’d still planned on killing you the moment I got a chance, so – so *why?”*

“We’re–” Jon stops himself, rephrases. “In my future, we became friends.”

“What?”

“W-well, we – we were both Avatars trying to resist our darker natures. We went through *this* together. We just – we had a lot in common.”

Daisy offers no comment.

“I… don’t know what I would have done without you, honestly,” Jon continues, jiggling one foot nervously as best he can in the confined space. “You were… the only one I had, most days. The only one who knew what it was like, having the hunger consume you because you refuse to feed it. And – and you had Basira, but she… there were things she didn’t fully understand, couldn’t relate to. So you would come to me. We, uh… we helped each other. Trusted each other.” He adds, a bit timidly: “I… I’ve missed you.”

Still, Daisy says nothing. Jon is about to start rambling again – about what, he doesn't know; he just needs to fill the awkward silence somehow – but Daisy speaks first.

"But – but what about before all that? Why did you come down here the first time around?"

"I was… in a bad place," Jon admits. "Tim was dead, Sasha was dead, Melanie hated me and wished *me* dead, Basira saw me as a monster, Georgie wanted nothing to do with me, and Martin was… gone. I had no one, I wasn't human anymore, I was afraid and ashamed and guilty and *tired,* and I… I was starting to doubt my decision to live. Not wanting to die had started to feel selfish, and I – I needed some way to justify living, some way to make myself useful.

"When we found out that you were alive, I – I just didn't want to lose anyone else. If there was a chance of bringing you home, I had to try. And… there was nothing to lose. If I got stuck down here, it – it would be no great loss. The world would have even been safer for it – more so than I even imagined at the time. I… honestly didn't think that anyone would care if I didn't come back."

"That's messed up," Daisy says, a hint of wry amusement in her voice.

"Yeah," Jon says with a self-deprecating laugh. "That's what you said last time. Like I said, I was in a bad place. But – but in the end, we got out. I know I can get us out of here again. I promised Basira I would bring you home, and I – I – I will. I just… I need some time to find the way."

"No pressure," she deadpans.

Jon makes a strangled, exasperated noise in his throat.

"Seriously?"

If he could gesture at the tons of dirt pressing down on them, he would – but he *can't,* because of the *tons of dirt pressing down on them.*

"Just trying to lighten the mood," Daisy says, just the slightest hint of a self-satisfied smirk in her voice. Jon feels one corner of his mouth quirk in spite of himself.

God, he really had missed her.

The concept of time has no meaning within the Buried. Without any real way to observe or calculate its passing, things tend to feel stagnant. One long note of boredom and desperation and restriction. If not for the unpredictable tides of the soil around them, it might even feel as if time is at a standstill. In a way, it is: there is only one time here, and it is *forever* – or until the End of everything, at least. To make things worse, true sleep is impossible in the Buried. Sometimes, though, there is a lull in the movements of the earth, and within that liminal space, the mind may be allowed to drift.

Jon isn't sure how long he's been drifting when Daisy tugs on his hand.

"Jon."

"Hm?"

"You're muttering again."

"Oh." Jon clears his throat when he realizes how groggy he sounds. "Was I?"

"Care to share?"

“I’m just – I keep thinking about how Basira escaped the Unknowing,” he says, rousing himself. Out of habit, he tries to stretch, only to remember that he can barely move at all – which, of course, only intensifies the urge to fidget.

“Oh?” Daisy shakes both his hands in hers, prompting him to continue. Judging by the waver in her voice, the silence must be getting to her again. “How – how’s that?”

“She… *thought* her way out. Like a – an ‘I think therefore I am’ thought experiment.” Jon smiles to himself and shakes his head slightly. “She put Descartes to shame.”

“Not even a fair comparison,” Daisy scoffs.

“Agreed.”

“Were you thinking of trying that here?”

“I… don’t think it would work.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re not that level-headed.”

“That’s–” Jon’s indignation fizzles out just as quickly as it emerged. “That’s… okay, yes, that’s fair.”

Daisy snickers; Jon can’t help a small grin in return.

“But what I was *actually* trying to say is that it was a strategy uniquely tailored to the Stranger. The Unknowing was all about – unreality, about not being able to trust your senses, even your own identity. Basira figured out that the best way to anchor herself in that situation was to boil her entire reality down to simple logical premises: She existed. She existed in a place and time. The place was dangerous at that time, so she had to not exist in that place at

that time. Places have ends, and if she kept moving, she could reach a different place, and exist there instead."

"Huh."

"Straightforward. Elegant, even."

"It's Basira," Daisy says, unmistakable fondness creeping into her tone. Jon snorts. *"Shut up,* Sims. You were saying?"

"The Buried doesn't operate in the same way. Basira reasoned her way out of the Stranger's domain by denying unreality. If we tried to do the same thing, we'd just be denying… well, *reality*. The earth, the pressure, the – the 'too close I cannot breathe,' it's all real."

"Good pep talk."

"Sorry, that's not what I–" Jon sighs. "I didn't mean to sound… morose. I was just thinking about different kinds of anchors. Basira managed to center herself and use her own mind as an anchor, and I – I find that impressive, is all."

"That's one way to describe her," Daisy says. "She's… always been like that. Practical, reliable… centered."

Wait, Jon thinks to himself, brow furrowed. *What if*...

"Daisy, tell me about Basira."

"What?"

“I – she’s your anchor, right? And – and you’re hers.”

“I don’t know about–”

“She called you solid, a – a – a fixed point,” Jon says excitedly. “When you’re there, things make *sense* to her. You ground her. And now, without you, she’s… she has trouble knowing where she stands. She has no backup, no one to orient her. What she did during the Unknowing – it was impressive, but it isn’t sustainable over a long period of time. You can only go it alone for so long before you lose your bearings. She – she *needs* you. And you need her. Right?”

“*She’s* the fixed point,” Daisy murmurs, as if that explains everything – and maybe it does.

“Exactly, s-so – tell me about Basira. From your perspective.”

“Why?”

“Because this is the Buried, where we’re at the center and everything is weighing down on us,” Jon says, mind racing five steps ahead of him. “The dirt, the pressure, it’s all *real,* but – but the Fears are also about state of mind.”

Jon can feel his heart rate pick up, the way it does whenever he’s talking his way through a puzzle. If he could, he would be pacing right now, burning off that restless energy. Instead, he finds himself tapping his fingers rapidly against Daisy’s hands. She doesn’t stop him, though.

“I’m not saying that we can solve this with ‘mind over matter’ thinking, but it might – help, if we can *both* focus on an anchor – a different center point, that is, one outside of this place. Move from *this* center to *that* center. There’s a better chance of figuring out which way is up if we’re both feeling for the way out. We can orient each other. If we both feel a tug from the same direction, we know we’re going the right way.”

“I can’t feel anything, though,” Daisy says. “Or – I *can,* but it’s – it’s *everywhere*, pushing in one direction – pushing *down*–”

Jon grips her hands more tightly when he hears her breathing start to grow ragged.

“That’s why you need to tell me about Basira – until you *do* feel a pull. I could be way off, but it’s worth a try. And – and if nothing else, it might help clear *my* mind, so I can give finding the way out another shot.”

“A statement, then?” Daisy asks sardonically. “Recharge your battery?”

“I wish,” Jon says with a grim smile. “The Eye only likes horror stories. If any story would sate my appetite, I could just watch biopics any time I was feeling a bit peaky. Hell, imagine if a fictional story was enough. An episode of *The Archers* would be like an afternoon snack.”

“You like *The Archers?”* He doesn’t have to see her to know that her eyebrows are raised as high as they’ll go.

“You know, I said the exact same thing to you once. And no, I don’t, but *you* do, and you used to make me listen with you. We didn’t even make a dent in the back catalogue, but I’m an Avatar of terrible knowledge and the Beholding loves spoilers, so guess who Knows every episode now?” Daisy barks a laugh at that. “There are over *nineteen thousand* episodes, Daisy!”

“That sounds like a you problem.”

“Anyway,” Jon says, squeezing both of her hands in lieu of nudging her shoulder, “a story just… helps take me out of my own head sometimes. Always has. You’re humoring me, not the Eye. Besides, do you have anything better to do?”

“S’pose not.”

“I mean – you don’t have to, of course, if you’re uncomfortable. I don’t want to pressure you–” Jon cringes. “Bad choice of words. I–”

“Stop babbling, Sims.” He knows that tone of voice, knows that she’s rolling her eyes right now. “We only have so long before the walls close in again–”

Daisy cuts herself off with a strangled noise, which she tries to cover by clearing her throat. She was likely trying to lighten the mood again, but the inevitability of the Buried’s ebb and flow is still too real, too close.

“Do you, uh… do you want to hear a story or not?”

“Please.”

“Back again?”

Martin jolts at the sound of Georgie’s voice. He tosses a brief glare over his shoulder at her where she stands just outside the doorway to the office, a safe distance from the Coffin. Martin discovered quickly that the Coffin’s compulsion has no impact on him, likely muffled by his allegiance to the Lonely. Georgie, on the other hand, has no such protection.

Coincidentally, that means that as long as Martin keeps close to the Coffin, Georgie has to keep her distance from him as well.

“It’s been a week,” Martin says in a quiet monotone, tearing his gaze away from her.

“Yeah.”

“He should have been back by now.”

“Well, he didn’t really give a time frame–”

“But you said he implied that it wouldn’t take more than a week,” Martin says impatiently. “And knowing Jon, he exaggerated how long it would take, just so no one would worry if he was late.”

“I… yeah, I know,” Georgie sighs. “I was expecting him to be back by now, too.”

Martin nods in a clear *‘I told you so’* gesture – then immediately feels childish. Why is he acting *vindicated* by her admission?

“Does Peter know you’ve been coming down here?”

“Don’t care.”

“Oh?” Georgie says, her voice suspiciously bland – and only then does Martin register the significance of what he just said.

“I just meant – it’s–” Martin huffs. “It’s none of your business.”

“Of course.” Martin can *hear* the smirk in her tone.

“Why are you here?” he snaps, swiveling to look at her again.

“Same reason you are, I expect.”

Martin says nothing to that, simply turns his back on her. For a few minutes, the only sound is the low, indistinct chatter of the tape recorders, still spooling out their horror stories on a loop.

"Have you tried calling to him?" Georgie asks. Martin continues to ignore her, teeth clenched until they ache. "It could be worth a shot. He left all those tapes running – don't know if he can *hear* them exactly, but they're meant to call to him."

Go away, Martin thinks, his hands curling into fists on his knees.

"Your voice might be better than a recording."

Why is she so persistent?

"Just – think about it, okay?"

When Martin doesn't respond, Georgie sighs, knocks twice on the door frame, and takes her leave. He doesn't look back around until the sound of her footsteps fade away.

"Sure, just leave the door wide open," he grumbles irritably, rising to his feet to remedy the issue.

He pulls the office door shut with more force than intended, practically slamming it. The lone tape recorder on Jon's desk, previously standing on end, topples over with a light clatter. Martin exhales heavily and pinches the bridge of his nose, trying to suppress the static buzz of nervous energy simmering inside him.

"But we need you, Jon," the tape recorder grinds out. *"Jon, please, just – please."*

“Fuck,” Martin says, voice thick and strained. He takes several deep breaths – in through his nose, out through his mouth – trying to clear his thoughts. Eventually, his shoulders slump and he sighs. *“Fine.* You win.”

He settles himself on the floor in front of the Coffin again, closer this time.

“Jon,” he says, then falters, unsure of what to say. “I–” He lets out an agitated breath, then follows it up with a bitter chuckle. “This is stupid. You probably can’t even hear this, can you?”

There is an uncomfortable, stinging pressure in his eyes and he reflexively tries to swallow back the tears, only to realize how dry his mouth has become. He rubs his eyes instead, digging the heels of his palms into the sockets and applying pressure.

“I – if you – if you *can* hear me, I… I already lost you once. I can’t do this all over again, I just – I *can’t.* I’m – everyone is waiting for you, and I still…” Martin sniffles and clears his throat. “Just – come home, Jon. *Please*.”

“I think I’d forgotten what it was like to just be… present in the moment? A – a quiet moment, anyway.” Daisy sighs. “On a hunt, you always have to think a few steps ahead, anticipate the prey’s movements so you can get out in front of it. Even when you’re present-thinking, like during a fight, it’s – it’s instinct and reflex, quick movements and jagged edges. You can never just… *be.*”

“I think I understand,” Jon says. “Not the Hunt aspect, but – but the intolerance of stillness, and fixating so intently on the thing you seek that nothing else registers.”

Like solving a mystery at any cost; like seeing the shape of a statement and losing sight of everything else; like needing to Know, even if it means drowning.

“Yeah,” Daisy says. “It's like… tunnel vision, sort of. All that matters is the chase, the catch, the kill. Everything else is secondary. But that day, that moment – laying back in the grass, Basira going on about the stars – I was… I was so focused on her that it was almost like tunnel vision, except it wasn't the Hunt's doing. It was just *me.* She gets so excited whenever she has a chance to talk about something new she’s learned, and I – I let her go on for” – Daisy laughs – “going on forty minutes, probably, about – about the Wow! signal before she looked over and saw me staring. Got all embarrassed that I let her talk so long.”

Jon can feel himself grinning.

“In her defense, the Wow! signal is a fascinating topic.”

“I thought so,” Daisy says warmly. “I mean, I must’ve, right? The whole time she was talking, I never felt the blood calling to me. Afterwards, it felt wrong, somehow – unnatural – that I’d been ignoring it. Not even resisting it, just – tuning it out altogether. I didn’t notice until then how *loud* it was – like for my whole life there had been teeth at my throat and I just never noticed until that moment.” She pauses. “It’s strange, but I – I think I liked it. The quiet.”

“I don’t think it’s strange at all,” Jon says softly. “I think–”

Suddenly, there’s a distinct wrenching sensation within him – like having a hook yank upwards, painless but abrupt enough to make his breath catch in his throat.

“Jon?” Daisy says warily. “What’s wrong?”

There’s something there.

“Do – do you feel that?”

“No? What – what is it?”

“It’s – wait, just let me…”

Jon concentrates, holding his breath as he waits, and–

There. Another pull, like a fish tugging at a line. And another, gentler but just as insistent.

“Daisy, I–” Jon lets out a breathless little laugh. “I think I know the way. C-come on, follow me.”

Chapter End Notes

- tbh I was tempted to split this into two chapters but it felt like it wanted to be all one thing, and also I didn't want to end on an angsty cliffhanger because:

- I know I was managing a loose every-7-to-10-days-ish update schedule for awhile there, but it miiiight start looking more like an every-two-weeks schedule going forward. I've been on split shifts at work but we're supposedly going back full time soon, so that might affect how much writing time I have each day. Just wanted to give a heads up in case it takes longer than usual before the next chapter is ready.

- There are several snippets of dialogue borrowed/reworked from Jon & Daisy's conversation in the Buried in MAG 132 - they're scattered throughout the chapter. (The "This is forever deep below creation..." and "One thing I've learned..." internal dialogue bits are from 132 also.) Probably goes without saying, but Martin's Lonely statement is from MAG 170 and there's also a previously cited usage of his dialogue from the S4 trailer. The Tim quote is from MAG 117. "The blanket never did anything" (still one of the creepiest lines in the podcast i s2g) is from MAG 086.

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

Up and Out

Chapter Summary

In which Jon and Daisy come up for air; Martin does some introspection.

Chapter Notes

Heads up: This chapter makes use of a custom work skin to format the text messages towards the end of the chapter. It might show up a bit wonky if you have creator's styles hidden.

Content warnings for Chapter 14: Buried-typical elements (claustrophobia, inability to breathe/move, etc.); mention of past suicidal ideation; some anxiety/panic symptoms; brief description of a past depressive episode; relatively mild blood/injury; swears; some Unsettling Spider Trivia (personally I think it's fascinating but if you're afraid of or just hate spiders maybe just skip a bit ahead when you get to that part).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Much like the ebb and flow of the Buried, that sensation of being pulled vacillates. A few times now, it's disappeared almost entirely, leaving Jon disorientated and suddenly doubting whether he's headed in the right direction despite being certain only moments before. It always comes back before long, but each time it's happened, he's had to pause to fight down the knee-jerk influx of panic.

Right this moment, he's stopped – both because that sensation is dwindling again and because he's simply winded. They've been in a particularly tight squeeze for quite some time now, and he's aching and exhausted from the struggle.

"Jon?" Daisy prompts, panting even more heavily than he is. Nearly eight months of muscular atrophy and restricted lung capacity haven't done any favors for her stamina. "A-are you okay?"

"Yeah. Just – just taking a break. Getting my bearings."

“Anchor f-fading again?” He has a feeling she was aiming for casual, but the trepidation creeps into her voice anyway.

“Yes. But don’t worry, I’ll find it again. I just need to catch my breath.”

Daisy laughs. It comes out as some combination of a wheeze and a whimper.

“I d-don’t think I’ve been able to catch my breath in… I – I don’t know how long.”

“You will soon,” he promises, rubbing circles on the back of her hand with his thumb.

“I – I c-can barely remember what that’s like. F-feels like I’ll never know it again–”

“I know,” Jon says gently, “I know. I – I know it’s worse for you – you’ve been here longer – but I do remember that feeling. I promise I’ll get us out of here.”

“And – and then what?” she says in a near-whisper. “The Hunt, it – it’s going to come back, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. But – you’ll still be you, and I’ll still be me, and we’ll – we’ll both fight to keep it that way.”

“I – I never thought about it, b-but – I’m prey too, aren’t I?” Daisy makes a noise that straddles the line somewhere between a laugh and a sob. “It – it’ll always chase me down, and it’s – stronger, f-*faster*–”

“Maybe, but I think you might be more stubborn.” Daisy gives a weak chuckle. “We all are, aren’t we?” Jon continues, emboldened by her reaction and intent on distracting her from her

burgeoning panic. “Wonder if it’s somewhere in the job requirements: must be stubborn, curious, and preternaturally unlucky.”

This time, Daisy actually does laugh – clipped and wet with barely-contained tears, but a laugh all the same. For a minute she’s quiet, before sniffling once and clearing her throat.

“Can you tell me what happened last time? Did I – was I able to…”

“You fought it, yes,” Jon says slowly. “The call of the blood was always in the background. Distractions helped to take the edge off, sometimes. You spent most of your time with Basira. You and I spent a lot of time together, too. Tried to listen to the quiet. Both of us.”

“It sounds like there’s a ‘but.’”

“There is,” he admits.

“It caught up to me,” Daisy guesses, sounding resigned.

“It did. But… you refused it right up until the point where it was your last resort. The Institute was under attack, and Martin was in danger, and you and Basira stayed behind to deal with the threat to buy me time enough to find him. A pair of Hunters cornered you. Basira couldn't take them both, and you… you were too weakened from resisting the Hunt to stand a chance against either of them. You let the Hunt back in because it was the only way you could protect Basira. You made her promise to find you and kill you when it was over, and you told her to run.”

“Do you – do you think if not for that, I would have kept resisting? Or was I just – using that as an excuse to give in?”

“I don’t know,” Jon says truthfully. He hesitates, attempting to balance honesty with tact. “You were wasting away. We all thought that refusing to feed the Hunt might kill you eventually. But whenever the subject came up, you said you were willing to die rather than let

it back in. You were – adamant. And I think… I think you would have followed through on it. Resisting, I mean. Even if it meant dying."

"I see," Daisy murmurs.

"Actually, it's – probably morbid to say, but I envied your resolve. You didn't want to be a predator again. You thought death was preferable to being lost to the blood. Right up until the end." He shakes his head. "But – but maybe we can find a – a different way. Me coming back has already changed some things that I thought were inevitable. Just – don't give up hope?"

Daisy makes a noise of acknowledgement, but Jon can't glean anything else from it.

"I know it sounds bleak," he concedes, "and – and maybe it is. But for what it's worth, I'll be right there with you. I'm not taking live statements this time around, and it – has similar effects on me that refusing the Hunt does for you. Reading old statements takes the edge off, sometimes, but based on past experience, it… won't be sustainable, and I'll – I'll have to cross that bridge when I get to it, I suppose. It's not exactly the same – our patrons operate in different ways – but it did… help, last time, having someone nearby who knew what it was like."

"You… *know* things now, right?"

"It's… complicated. There are a lot of constraints and" – he huffs – "I don't have nearly as much control over it as everyone wishes I did, but… yes."

"Any educated guesses on our chances?"

"None," Jon says with a grim half-smile. "The Beholding tends to be uncooperative when it comes to concepts like escape and recovery. I won't lie – marks don't fade, and as far as I can tell, once someone is fully beholden to one of the Powers, there's no undoing it. You embrace it, or you wither away. You feed it, or it feeds on you."

“Sounds about right.”

“But,” Jon says emphatically, “you should also know that no one had ever escaped the Coffin before we did. And we’re about to do it again. So… who knows. Maybe there’s a third option and we just haven’t found it yet. I can’t promise there’s another way, but if there is… we’ll find it.”

“Or die trying?” Daisy replies, a wry edge to her tone now.

“Suppose so. But not without making a nuisance of ourselves first. I still don’t Know if the Fears are sentient, but on the off chance they are, I find that spite is a decent motivator.”

“Naturally.” Daisy snorts. “I wonder what annoys the Hunt?”

“Don’t know. Fraternizing with someone who was marked as prey, maybe. You told me once that on bad days, my blood was the loudest thing in the Archives. We theorized the Hunt wasn’t too keen on you letting me go.”

“You… weren’t afraid I’d turn on you?” Daisy asks, the question steeped in disbelief.

“No.”

“Is that because you were suicidal, or because you honestly thought I wouldn’t kill you?”

“I wasn’t–” Jon sighs. “My mental state aside, I trusted you. You were as stubborn as I was. Maybe more. Even if we weren’t friends, I imagine you’d have snubbed the Hunt anyway, just on principle.”

Before Daisy can reply, the earth around them begins to shake again, soil coming loose and raining down on them from above. They both hold their breath, waiting for the impending crush – but it doesn’t come, and after a few seconds, they exhale simultaneously. Jon’s comes

out as something of a cough, jolted out of him by the now-familiar sensation of an insistent upward pull.

“Anchor’s back,” he gasps out. “Ready to move?”

As they move forward – *up,* Jon assures himself, *we’re making progress* – the perpetual squeeze begins to open up into a narrow passageway. Sometimes they need to dig to bypass blockages and widen their tunnel, but the closer they draw to the surface, the hard-packed earth gradually gives way to looser soil.

Between one moment and the next, Jon’s fingertips – already raw and sticky with blood from burrowing through the debris – scrape against something much harder and rougher than packed earth. Solid rock, hidden by a few inches of soil. He hisses as he feels another layer of skin peel away on contact with the abrasive texture, but he brightens at the memory of the stone steps and walls at the entrance to the Buried.

“We’re getting close, Daisy,” he says excitedly, tugging on her hand. “We’re almost there–”

The Buried compresses in a blink, crushing them up against one another.

“Shit,” Jon hisses. “Shouldn’t’ve said anything.”

“Jon?” Daisy's voice pitches higher than usual, shot through with barely concealed panic.

“It’s okay, Daisy. This happened the last time, too. Just” – the earth contracts further, forcing a whine out of him – “wringing one last bit of t-terror out of us before we leave.”

“Th-that’s – greedy of it,” she rasps with a nervous chuckle.

“I find that – a-all the Powers tend to be – like that. Needy, spiteful things, all – all of them.”

So do their Avatars, for that matter. Jon thinks of how Helen couldn’t resist frightening him one last time before parting ways at Hill Top Road; of how Jude Perry knew she was going to die and chose to spend her last moments pulling him down to her level; of how Manuela Dominguez knew she had failed, but still wanted to take someone out with her; of how Peter Lukas couldn’t lose a bet gracefully, how he dragged Martin into the Lonely and tried to trap Jon there as well; of how Jonah wasn’t content to just have Jon read out his ritual, how he just had to hijack Jon’s voice to monologue first.

And Jon himself isn’t all that different, is he? Didn’t he force himself to confront Jonah in the Panopticon, even though he knew it would have no material impact on anything? Doesn’t he regularly provoke the Eye with small acts of rebellion? How many times has he mouthed off to an assailant threatening his life? He just said it himself: spite can be a decent motivator. Failing that, sometimes it just feels gratifying.

“It’ll – let up,” Jon says, for himself as much as Daisy. “J-just – give it a minute.”

As if to be contrary, it actually takes several minutes before the pressure starts to withdraw. Slowly, so very slowly, the collapsed tunnel begins to expand again, releasing another downpour of dirt in the process. The passage is still tight and they have to squirm through in small increments, but after some of the squeezes they passed through on their way, even a few extra centimeters of wiggle room feels like a luxury.

That said, Daisy’s breathing is increasingly labored, punctuated by soft whimpers.

“You doing alright, Daisy?”

“Y-yeah, ‘m fine.” Her breath catches and comes out as a pained groan. “Chest hurts,” she says brusquely, before Jon can express concern.

“Your lungs aren’t accustomed to having this much room to expand,” he replies, striving for a bland tone.

“W-well, they’ll just h-have to – get used to it.”

“They will, but – take it slow? Last time, you had a fair amount of bruising. A few cracked ribs as well. We both did.”

In fact, he thinks they might just be the exact same ribs he injured last time, if the pain is anything to go by.

“Listen,” he says, “I – I think we’re coming up on the exit soon.”

“*Soon* soon?”

“Fairly certain, yes. Before we leave, I should tell you – Elias doesn’t know that I’m from the future; doesn’t know how much we know. I’d prefer to keep it that way as long as possible. He can’t See us while we’re in here, but as soon as we’re out – the only safe place is the tunnels, like before.”

“Got it.”

“And also, I…” *Not much for it,* he tells himself. *Make your peace with it now.* “I might lose my voice again as soon as we’re out. Maybe – maybe even before then.”

“Again?”

“I – I mean, I’ll be able to talk, just – not in my own words.” Jon tries to wet his lips and immediately regrets it, succeeding only in drawing more dirt into his mouth. He grimaces and sputters a bit, to no avail.

“Jon?”

“Y-yeah, sorry. I, ah – remember what I said, about – about the Archive? I’ve – outside of here, I’ve only been able to speak using the statements in my… library, I suppose.”

He says the last part with distaste, all but spitting the words out as if they’re poison.

“Huh.”

“It started partway through the apocalypse, and it followed me when I came back. Being in the Buried’s domain has cut me off from the Archive for now, but once the Eye can reach me again, I – there’s a chance it’ll take over again.” He sighs. “More than a chance, it’s – probably more of a certainty. I just wanted to let you know now, I – I’m still me, it’s just – the Archive puts limits on how I communicate, and it can be – off-putting. And annoying. And… abhorrent.”

“Abhorrent?”

“I mean… appropriating other people’s trauma any time I want to speak? It’s…”

There’s no succinct way to capture just how – how *perverse* it is, exploiting the words of the people who lived through the horrors retold in the statements. Some of them, Jon himself victimized. More than *some,* if he considers the billions he condemned in his future. Claiming their terror for his own use doesn’t feel all that different from actually taking statements: dehumanizing, objectifying, degrading. It’s all on the same ghoulish spectrum of monstrosity, just… slightly different shades of wrong.

All he says aloud, though, is the last part: “It’s wrong.”

And yet, you do it anyway, he thinks, disgusted with himself.

“Like going from one hell to another, isn’t it?” Daisy says after a pause. “Getting out of here, only for the Eye and – and the Hunt to be waiting on the other side.”

“Yeah. As much as I want to get out of here, I’m… not looking forward going back to – *that*.” Jon sighs, then rallies himself. “But fresh air and a drink of water do sound nice, don’t they?”

“And a *bath,*” Daisy says, as if it’s the most beautiful word in the world. Jon laughs quietly.

“The Institute only has the one shower, I’m afraid. No tub, terrible water pressure, occasionally–”

“–occasionally runs cold without warning mid-shower,” Daisy finishes, an audible grin in her tone. “I recall. You won’t hear me complaining, though.”

“Nor me. Not for the next couple weeks, anyway.”

“Mm. Yeah, I’m sure you’ll hear me swearing up a storm at four in the morning about water temperature at some point.”

“Assuming that trivial detail hasn’t changed since I was last here, yes, I will,” Jon says with an amused huff. He readjusts his grip on her hand and tugs gently. “Come on, we’re getting closer.”

Martin sits in his office, head in his hands and the heels of his palms pressed to his eyes.

Eight days. It's been eight days since Jon went into the Coffin. There have been no signs of when – *if* – he'll return, and there's nothing Martin can do to reach him.

Stupid, he thinks fiercely, *to think that sitting there and talking to a – a box of dirt would do anything.*

Keeping vigil at Jon's bedside at the hospital for months had done nothing to bring him back. Why would this be any different? When Martin's predictions panned out, he felt almost vindicated that he was right – comforted by the confirmation that he is still all alone in the world; relieved by the reassurance that nothing will disturb his solitude after all.

There's a part of him that still has the decency to feel ashamed at that impulse, but it's small and distant and shrinking by the day. And yet… it's still *there,* withered though it may be: a sentimental sliver of attachment that stubbornly refuses to die, both to his dismay and – to a lesser but nonetheless undeniable extent – his relief. No matter how pessimistic his outlook has become these days, he *had* still hoped against all the odds that reaching out to Jon would have some sort of effect.

It didn't. Of course it didn't. That sort of hopeless romanticism is for fairytales. Sure, given the existence of extradimensional fear entities, it isn't inconceivable that some sort of… long distance psychic bond, or link, or – or *whatever* could exist. But Martin has yet to see any evidence pointing to the existence of powers like *hope* and *love* to balance out the existence of Smirke's Fourteen.

That admission alone is enough to whittle away at that stubborn sentimentality just a little further.

And that's for the best, he tells himself.

He can feel a bitter smile flicker at the corner of his mouth. The Lonely's really got its hold on him, hasn't it?

But no matter how well-suited he is to the Lonely, no matter how resigned he is to the idea that he's destined to be alone, and that that's exactly as it should be… Martin still cares for

Jon. His emotions feel dulled most days, as if they're happening to someone else, but the act of caring… he doesn't have to *feel* in order to go through the motions. It takes effort and thought, certainly, but the impulse is second nature.

Peter tells him that he'll be free of it before long. Martin doesn't know how he feels about that. Nothing, usually, or something adjacent to it.

Apparently he hasn't cauterized his feelings as much as he thought, though. For the past week, the sense of detachment he's built up over months of practice and resignation and goal-oriented focus has been interrupted. The calm and quiet that have become so comfortable to him have been punctuated by windows of raw, wild emotion and sensory overload and sharp, racing thoughts, and it's *too much* – especially all at once – after months of fog and cold and single-minded resolve.

He still doesn't know what he feels, but it's *something* rather than *nothing,* and it hurts.

"Brooding, are we?" comes a voice from right behind Martin, sending an icy chill through him.

"Peter!" Martin nearly snarls, glaring over his shoulder at him. "I've *told* you to stop doing that–"

"So, Martin," Peter continues, smoothly overriding Martin's complaints, "I can't help but notice you've been quite… distracted recently."

Martin looks away, clenches his teeth, and says nothing.

"Oh, I'm not upset, Martin. I'm simply curious to know where we stand. To gauge the magnitude of this… little setback."

"Setback?" Martin whips back around, incensed. "You really think I care about – about my *progress* right now?"

“Judging by your tone, it appears not.” Peter smiles, that customary aloof smirk that doesn’t reach his eyes. “Not very reassuring, but I thank you for your honesty. It shows that we *do* still have our work cut out for us.”

Martin should keep his composure. He should keep his mouth shut. He should feign indifference and continue playing the long game to which he’s committed himself, but he can feel his heart hammering in his chest and he can hear his blood rushing in his ears and all the words he cannot – should not – *has to* say are brimming in his throat and–

“I don’t *care,* Peter!” Martin almost doesn’t recognize his own voice when the outburst claws its way out. “You *promised*–”

“That I would protect your coworkers from external threats,” Peter says mildly.

“You don’t think one of the Circus’s monsters just – waltzing unnoticed into the Archives hauling a bloody gateway to the – the *literal* manifestation of claustrophobia counts as an *external threat*–”

“By the time the intruder’s presence came to my attention, it had already been dealt with. Quite handily, in fact. As for the Coffin itself, our agreement did *not* extend to saving a self-destructive Archivist from his own foolhardiness. There’s only so much that I can do.”

“Then *apparently* I need to pick up your slack.”

Once again, Peter ignores him and steers the conversation to his liking.

“I will say, I was pleased to see that the Coffin’s song has no effect on you. It shows that your connection to the Forsaken is still intact.” Peter begins to pace slowly, hands folded behind his back. “I *am* interested to know why you’ve been spending so much time so close to it in the first place. Why you were… speaking to it.”

Martin huffs irritably. “I thought it might help.”

“I wonder where you got that idea.” When Martin doesn’t reply, Peter stops his pacing and sighs. “I don’t mean to be invasive” – Martin snorts derisively; Peter continues without pause – “but I notice you’ve spoken to that – woman quite a few times.”

“She’s no one,” Martin says hurriedly, hoping that Peter doesn’t notice his momentary nervous flinch.

“Is that so?” Peter gives a contemplative hum. “If she’s trespassing on Institute property and interfering with day-to-day operations, perhaps I should have her… removed.”

All at once, the world around Martin rushes into focus: clearer, sharper, brighter, louder, more *real* – every sensation more immediate, every thought more acute. He feels his spine go rigid as he sits up straight and locks eyes with Peter.

“Peter,” he says, balanced on a razor’s edge between firm and furious, “we talked about that. You agreed to let me handle–”

“Workplace disputes and employee conduct,” Peter says. “Not interlopers.”

‘Interlopers’? Really, Peter?

“Here I thought you might be glad to have someone like her around,” Martin says, forcing calm back into his voice. “Give me some practice pushing people away.”

“Perhaps. But if she’s posing a distraction in the workplace–”

“Like the Archives aren’t a distraction all on their own,” Martin seethes, his impassivity quickly teetering into agitation again, “what with the – the forbidden tunnel labyrinth, and monster attacks, and surprise coffin deliveries, and the *watching*–”

“You know what I meant. If she’s distracting you from *your* work–”

“When have I ever left any administrative tasks unfinished, hmm?”

“Martin.”

“Yes?” Martin says, meeting Peter’s eyes with a level stare. There’s a muscle twitching almost imperceptibly in the other man’s jaw. It’s not easy to provoke that sort of response from Peter, and Martin would be lying to himself if he said he didn’t feel just a bit gratified.

Peter takes a breath. When he speaks again, he’s regained his usual mild manner – but Martin can still detect just a hint of tension underneath.

“As I have told you before, you are the *only* one who can do this. The plan–”

“Which you have yet to *explain*–”

“–requires a servant of the Eye, imbued with the power of the Lonely. The cultivation of that power depends on your *voluntary* isolation. I can’t force you to cooperate. I can only remind you of the consequences should the Extinction emerge – and if it emerges because you choose not to act, then, well…” Peter shrugs. “You can’t keep anyone safe from that sort of power, and that includes the Archivist.”

“You still haven’t convinced me that your theories about the Extinction are true.”

If anything, Martin is less convinced than ever. Jon didn’t exactly elaborate on what he knows, but he seems certain that the Extinction isn’t a threat. If that’s the case, the only other reason for Martin to cooperate with Peter is to keep Jon safe – or, barring that, to at least keep Peter away from him. And if Jon is gone, then… what’s the *point* of any of this?

Peter takes a step closer and slides a folder onto Martin's desk. Judging by how thin it is, Martin doubts there's much follow-up or supplementary material within.

"Then you'd best get reading," Peter says amiably, backing away again.

"Peter," Martin says, stopping him before he can take his leave.

"Hm?"

"If she disappears," he continues, mirroring Peter's faux-pleasant tone, "you can count on my non-cooperation going forward."

"Come now, Martin. We both know you wouldn't allow the Extinction to emerge over a single life."

Martin lifts his chin defiantly and gives Peter a hard look.

"I'd do it for Jon."

"And he's gone." There's a hungry glint in Peter's pale eyes. The temperature plummets a few degrees as thin tendrils of fog begin to unfurl from around his feet. "You're *alone*."

"Exactly." Peter's smug expression wavers at Martin's non-reaction. "You're a gambler. Shouldn't you recognize when you've shown your hand?" Martin shakes his head with a thin, humorless smile. The mist creeps closer: wispy eddies and grasping coils stretching across the floor to pool at his feet. "If Jon's gone, you've lost your best bargaining chip. I've nothing left to lose. At this point, you really should be thankful for whatever leverage you can find."

"You're bluffing."

“Try me.”

Peter simply chuckles, but Martin can detect the faint uncertainty laced through it.

“I mean it. If my work performance is unsatisfactory, just feed me to your patron now if you can’t resist. Seems a waste to do it before you’ve gotten what you need from me, but it makes no difference to me; I’m Forsaken either way.” Martin leans back in his chair with an air of nonchalance. “The only one who stands to lose anything is you.”

“And the entire world, should the Extinction evolve unchecked.”

“In that case, let her – let *everyone* connected with the Archives be. And don’t disappear any more staff, either.” Almost as an afterthought, he adds: *“Or* statement givers.”

There is a long silence in which Martin stares into Peter’s eyes, willing himself not to blink or falter. Eventually, the fog recedes and Peter’s fake, plastered-on smile reappears.

“Well, I think I’ve kept you from your work long enough.” Peter nods at the statement folder. “I’ll leave you to it.”

The moment the telltale static of Peter’s departure fades, Martin lets out a heavy exhale and rests his head in his arms on his desk. Every encounter with Peter tends to leave him feeling drained, but that one was more intense than usual.

“Prick,” Martin mutters to the empty office.

It takes a few minutes for him to register the low whirring coming from underneath his desk.

“Were you listening the whole time, then?” Martin scoops up the tape recorder from the floor. “Or,” he sighs, his eyes flicking to the waiting statement, “are you just hungry?”

Martin still doesn't know what to make of the recorders. On the one hand, supernatural artefacts never bode well. There's no telling what they are, what's listening on the other end, what controls their spontaneous appearance or *why.* Eavesdropping and surveillance are on brand for the Eye, but Jon had a point when he said that the Beholding would have no need to use tape recorders to listen in, especially within its own temple. They aren't Elias's doing – apparently all of his spying is done through eyes. The Web, maybe? But to what end?

On the other hand, Martin has grown so accustomed to their presence that he was actually unsettled by their absence while Jon was – away. When they started manifesting again, Martin was… relieved, almost. It isn't the same as having Jon nearby, but it feels like having a connection to him all the same. They've almost become a welcoming, comforting sight – at least for the first few seconds after their appearance, before they start making their usual demands.

Sometimes, Martin wonders whether Jon might be subconsciously manifesting them himself. Even before his paranoid episode, he seemed keen to document and catalog the world around him, as if it was the only way for him to make sense of it all. It always made Martin's heart ache, how Jon could never seem to relax, to let himself just *be* in the moment. His hypervigilance was exhausting by proxy, and it's only gotten worse as time goes on.

In any case, ever since Jon's coma – half-death? – showed that the recorders' existence is dependent on his, Martin has started to see their regular appearances as decent indicators as to whether Jon is alive at any given moment. And here they are, still showing up. Which means… what? Martin already knew that Jon is still alive. The Coffin doesn't let its victims die; death would be a release, and it's incompatible with a realm predicated on unending pressure, on the experience of being trapped with no hope of escape. But if Jon was entirely cut off from the world, lost and unreachable, wouldn't his connection with the recorders be severed as well? So, if they're still here, does that mean Jon isn't gone yet? That there's still a lifeline tethering him to the surface?

If so, it's a useless lifeline, isn't it? The tapes always make their way to Jon in time, but what good does that do in this situation? It's not like they're two-way radios; Martin can't communicate with Jon in real time.

Unless…

No. No *unless.* It's not even a long shot, it's just – daft.

But hasn't he already been treating them as stand-ins for Jon for the last few weeks? And is it *really* any more foolish than talking to a coffin?

Martin sighs as he eyes the tape recorder, its reels still insistently spinning. It isn't going to leave until it gets a statement. He waits it out for another minute or so, but in the end he gives in, just like it knew he would.

"Hi again, Jon," he starts, picking at his cuticles as uncertainly as he picks through his words. "I doubt you can hear me. At least not right now. But I know you listen to all the tapes eventually. Don't know if you'll ever get to hear this one, though. If not, I suppose this is rather pointless, isn't it? You're always so diligent about listening to them, too." Martin huffs. "Well, if you want this one, you'll have to come back and get it. I'm very cross with you, and I'd prefer to tell you in pers-"

Shut up, shut up, what are you saying?

The recorder lets out a short burst of static, as if protesting the break in his confession.

"Oh, shut it," he grumbles. "Not – not you, Jon. Sorry. I mean, not like you're hearing this anyway, right? Whatever, just – you're needed here, alright? You've been away too long. It's time to come home." Martin shakes his head and smiles weakly. "Funny, I – I remember when I used to have to nag you to go home at night. The more things change, the more they stay the same, right? Don't know what good a persuasive argument does in this case, though. It's not like you need convincing–"

Martin stops short, a sudden thought crystallizing cold and heavy in the front of his mind. For all he knows, Jon's gotten it into his head that he needs to stay in there to keep the rest of the world safe. It sounds like the sort of conclusion Jon would reach.

"I mean, I – I – I *hope* you're not willingly staying down there out of some misguided belief that it's – safer, for everyone? Jon?" Martin laughs nervously, on the edge of hysteria. "I – I don't know why I'm talking like I'll get a response. Anyway, it's – it's probably more likely

that you want to come back and you *can't,* right?" He chuckles again, and realizes too late how teary it sounds. "I don't even – I don't know which of those options is *worse,* but – but it's not like there's anything I can do in either case, so – what's the point of *this*, of *any* of this?"

Martin clamps both hands over his mouth to stifle his abrupt, stuttering intake of breath – the precursor to sobbing, if he isn't careful. He takes a long moment to compose himself, swallowing back tears and slowing his breathing.

"W-well, in case you *do* need to hear it… things are not better with you gone, okay?" His voice still sounds thick with emotion. In an attempt to steady it, he ends up overcorrecting, his next words coming out far more vehemently than he had intended. "They *aren't*. And I don't know how to make you believe that, b-but – if you don't come back, you'll never get a chance to learn, and it's not like you to pass up a chance to learn something, right, so – so just get back here, will you?"

He stops again. After months of suffocating, deadening quiet, raising his voice even slightly feels like shouting. He finds himself leaning closer towards the tape recorder, as if he's sharing a secret. Despite the conscious effort to lower his volume, it does nothing to temper the intensity of his speech.

"Jon, you're *late,* and everyone's waiting. Georgie's worried. Basira spends most of the day camped out in front of your office, just… listening for any change. I – I don't think she's been sleeping much. And Melanie, she–" Martin flounders. He hasn't spoken to Melanie in weeks, but he has no reason to assume her feelings towards Jon have changed. "W-well, she – she'll be angry if you break a promise to Georgie, yeah? And I'm – I…"

Martin doesn't know *what* he is.

"Look, Jon, you – you need to come back now," he says, more softly. More like a prayer than a demand. "Come home, and we'll… we'll figure things out."

He wracks his brain for more, but comes up speechless. There was a time when he could have spoken volumes about what Jon means to him. Now, anything Martin could possibly say feels shallow and jumbled and meaningless. Absolutely useless. But since when did words make any difference anyway? Jon has always been resistant to an outstretched hand. He rarely

accepted any offers of help or invitations to talk; could barely handle a kind word or comforting gesture some days. He seemed to be opening up in the weeks prior to the Unknowing, but then–

Martin lets out a sigh and shuts the tape recorder off. Almost immediately, it clicks back on.

"Seriously?" He stares daggers at the thing. "That wasn't enough for you?"

He depresses the button again, perhaps a little harder than necessary. The moment he removes his finger, the reels resume winding.

"Can't you just – piss off and let me have some quiet for *five minutes?"*

It can't, apparently. After several more foiled attempts to stop its droning, Martin gives an aggravated groan. As tempting as it is to hurl it at a wall, all the archival staff know from experience that the recorders are practically unbreakable, taking only superficial damage regardless of the attempted means to destroy them. Martin could toss it into a bonfire and at most it would come out a bit worse for wear; the casing would never melt or warp so badly as to render the buttons entirely nonfunctional.

More than once, Martin has caught himself wondering whether they get their durability from Jon. It's a morbid thought and Martin is always quick to shut it down, but, well – there it is again.

At least Jon's persistence is – charming. Martin glares at the tape recorder some more. *Unlike–*

The recorder crackles with another impatient uptick of static.

"Fine!" Martin flips open the folder on his desk, seizes the statement roughly, and gives himself a papercut in the process. Another hiss erupts from the recorder when he swears.

“Yeah? Well, I don’t *care* if personal commentary is unprofessional,” he snaps at it. He doesn’t know who he’s talking to.

When he finally turns his attention back to the statement in his hands, he makes no effort to hide his foul mood.

“Yet another statement about – I don’t know, but I’m sure it’s bleak and horrifying, or else it wouldn’t be so keen for me to read it. Recording by Martin Blackwood, Assistant to Peter Lukas, Head of the Magnus Institute…”

Stopping short, Daisy draws in a sharp breath.

“Daisy?” Jon tugs lightly on her hand. “You alright?”

“Jon, I – I feel something, like a – like a *pull*, I–” Daisy laughs breathlessly. “There’s an *up.*”

“What,” Jon says, grinning to himself now, “didn’t you believe me?”

But Daisy isn’t listening to him, instead continuing in an awestruck tone: “I’m – I – I’ll get to – to see Basira again.”

Her voice pitches up ever so slightly towards the end, making the statement sound almost like a question – as if she didn’t believe until this moment that seeing Basira again was even a possibility, as if she *still* doesn’t quite dare to believe it.

Jon has repeated the same promise dozens of times now along their trek to the surface. Once more can’t hurt: “She’s waiting for you.”

“I know,” Daisy whispers reverently. Then, louder, her mounting anticipation crowding out the remnants of disbelief: “I can feel it.”

So can Jon. For quite some time now, that feeling of being pulled along – almost like *he’s* an anchor being reeled in, oddly – has been relatively consistent. The strength of the sensation still fluctuates from time to time, but it’s been awhile since it last disappeared entirely.

Of course, now it’s also shot through with a far more unwelcome pull. He swears he can feel the Archive drawing nearer the closer they come to the exit. Maybe it’s simply his imagination, increasingly overactive as his dread intensifies, but the outcome is the same either way: the Eye will have him again, and soon.

“Come on, then,” Jon says, suppressing the grim edge threatening to creep into his tone. There’s no point in worrying Daisy just when she’s started to feel hopeful. “Almost home.”

Not long thereafter, the passage widens again. They still have to walk single file with their shoulders angled, forced to sidle through a few tight spots sideways, but the soil has finally transitioned entirely to solid stone walls and there is a noticeable upward slant to their path. All the while, Jon doesn’t let go of Daisy’s hand.

He grits his teeth against the lancing pain surging through his leg with every step as the incline grows steeper. From the sounds of Daisy’s labored breathing behind him, she’s having a far worse time of it. He’s just about to reassure her again that they’re almost there when his foot connects with something and he stumbles, pitching forward and nearly pulling Daisy down with him. His free hand flails in front of him to break his fall, and that’s when he recognizes–

“Stairs,” he whispers, feeling the shape of them, their flat surfaces and distinct angles.

“What?”

“Stairs, Daisy.” After pushing himself to his feet, Jon places his free hand against the wall as a guide. It’s still pitch dark, and it will be until they manage to lift the Coffin’s lid. “Not much further now. Watch your step, and go slowly. They’re uneven.”

Despite an abundance of caution, they both end up tripping several times on the way up. The steps are all different heights and depths: some short and wide shelves, some steep and narrow ledges nearing two feet high – which may seem negligible were they both not so weakened, winded, and wounded. Occasionally, a step that felt solid moments before would crumble underneath them, giving way like gravel; a few times, Jon could swear a step disappeared entirely just before he put his foot down.

He’s so focused on keeping his footing that he forgets to be wary of his head. When he places a foot on one particularly sheer step and propels himself upward with the other leg, his head collides violently with something just above him. The pain races through his skull, his neck, his spine, and he nearly topples backward in the momentary daze of the impact. He has just enough presence of mind to throw his weight forward so that when he loses balance, he collapses against the stairs instead of tumbling down them.

For a few seconds, all he knows is a high-pitched ringing in his ears and fireworks in his vision. He’s dimly aware of Daisy’s hands patting at him blindly, frantically; her voice is muffled, but he can detect the urgency there.

“‘M’fine,” he slurs. He tries to tell her to just give him a minute, that he recovers quickly from this sort of thing, but he’s pretty sure it comes out something more like *gim’nit.*

When he finally starts to come around, Daisy’s words, once fuzzy and indistinct, start to break through the haze: “Jon? Jon, are you alright?”

“Will be,” he groans. He pushes himself up with one hand and reaches up with the other, groping blindly. Either it’s closer than he thought or he put too much force into the gesture in his disorientation, but his knuckles collide with rough wood and he hisses when he catches a splinter.

“Jon?”

“Lid’s right above us,” he says unnecessarily. “Watch your head.”

Daisy snorts. “Noted.”

“I – I might need some help lifting it,” Jon says, his vertigo gradually fading. He places both palms flat on the underside of the lid. “Last time, it was a lot heavier on the way out than it was going in.”

“Got it.” Daisy crawls up a few steps to kneel next to Jon, her hands brushing against his as she reaches up to find a grip.

“Feel it?”

“Yeah,” she says. “Ready?”

“On three. One – two – *three–”*

As expected, it offers more resistance than it should, as if a force is pressing down from the other side. For a terrifying few seconds, it refuses to budge. Then, with a prolonged creak of protest, it starts to give. Even just the dim light of Jon’s office filtering through that first tiny crack is enough to hurt. Judging from the startled yelp next to him, Jon assumes Daisy is shutting her eyes as well.

Jon can hear the low chatter of the tapes he left behind, as well as something louder and clearer cutting through the white noise.

“I don’t know how much longer I can do this on my own.” Basira’s voice, overlaid with the crackle of radio static. *“I’m here, Daisy. I need you to be here, too. I need–”*

As soon as the opening is wide enough to stick a hand through, the pressure lets up all at once and the lid swings up the rest of the way. Jon scrambles over the side and grabs both of

Daisy's hands, dragging her up and out. He winces sympathetically when she cries out. She hasn't properly stretched those muscles in months. It must be agony.

The moment she's completely cleared the lip of the Coffin, Jon eases her to a kneeling position on the floor and drops her hands. Rising unsteadily to his feet with a pained groan, he takes hold of the lid and drags it back into place. He stumbles the short distance to his desk for the key and hastens to replace the chains and reaffix the padlock. On the way, he kicks a tape recorder and it goes sliding across the floor; an instant later, the knowledge comes to him: *Not a tape recorder. A two-way radio.*

His hands are shaking so badly that he fumbles the key four times before he manages to fit it into the lock. He's so absorbed in that simple, seemingly insurmountable task that he barely notices the swearing and clattering coming from just outside the office as someone on the other side goes through a similar struggle in their bid to unlock the door. Just as Jon turns the key, the office door swings open to reveal Basira, panting and wide-eyed. The radio in her hand drops to the floor as her eyes rest on Daisy, shivering and gasping for air.

"You're back," Basira murmurs, frozen in place.

"Hi," Daisy says with short, giddy laugh, before promptly collapsing onto the floor. It's enough to spur Basira into action, lurching forward and going to her knees next to her.

"Daisy," she says urgently, shaking her shoulder. "Daisy, please–"

"She's – she's alright," Jon says breathlessly, on hands and knees in front of the Coffin, gulping for air to fill his screaming lungs. "Just – needs to–"

He freezes.

"Jon," Basira says, disbelieving. "Your voice?"

“I – I – I thought I would – I would lose it again,” he stammers. He begins to move his hand up to his throat, but stops when his other arm trembles violently, unable to hold up his weight on its own. “I don’t – I don’t know, I – I might still, it – it–”

The thought turns to static and the words dissolve on his tongue.

“…it barely even sounded human as it – as it spoke in a strange monotone–”

Jon shakes his head frantically, bringing the lingering pain from his earlier head injury back into the forefront.

“…it was then that I became aware of them – hundreds of glossy dead eyes staring at me from all directions–”

“–a tremendous eye – turning to focus upon me–”

“–staring into me, acutely scrutinizing my reaction–”

“Jon!” He stops and looks up at Basira, suddenly realizing that she’s been repeating his name for several seconds now. “You’re hyperventilating. Just – breathe?”

He latches onto Basira’s voice, forcing himself to breathe – oh, god, he can *breathe* again–

“Good,” she says after a few moments, calm and steady. “Okay. Can you try talking again? No, Jon, listen – look at me,” she says when he shuts his eyes and starts shaking his head again. “Try talking again.”

“…but my inability to speak–”

“Humor me.”

"…it's still there, still watching me. There's nowhere I can go, a place I can hide that it doesn't keep looking at me – I can't sleep because they're watching me – those unseen eyes that hover everywhere and won't let me rest–"

"–I'm sorry – it won't let me say the words–"

"Yes, you can," she says. Firm, but not cruel. Authoritative, self-assured, decisive – a solid presence to fixate on. "You're just – too in your own head. Focus on me and try again."

"I–" he begins, then stops short. *Not the Archive.* He gives Basira an uncertain, panicked look.

"Keep going. Try – try something simple. Tell me your name."

"My name is…" His voice quivers as he forces the words out one syllable at a time.

"Go on. Who are you?"

"The Arch–"

The Archive, he almost says, before he remembers with a jolt of fear that Jonah might be listening. Besides, right now it would be *inaccurate,* wouldn't it? The Eye does not typically dispense outright falsehoods, and its Archive has no use for fictions. Deception is for the Stranger, for the Spiral, for the Web–

"Try again," Basira says patiently, drawing his attention back to her. "Who are you?"

"The Archivi–"

"No. Who, not what."

There is a long pause in which he cannot parse the instruction.

“Full name.”

“Jon,” he says slowly. The sound feels strange on his tongue. “Jonathan Sims. The Archivist.”

“Could’ve done without that last bit, but good enough.” Basira relaxes her posture. “You alright?”

“I – I don’t understand.” Lightheaded and trembling, Jon releases a shuddering breath and leans back on his heels, both hands gripping his knees. “How did you know that would work?”

“I didn’t. But you were spiraling, and I imagine that’s exactly what the Eye wants.”

“R-right. I, ah–” Jon runs a shaky hand through his hair, loosing a shower of dirt in the process. “I don’t know how long it will stay away, the Buried severed the connection temporarily, but now it–”

“Don’t dwell on it.” At his blank stare, Basira sighs. *“Yes,* I realize that’s not quite your speed, but try anyway.”

“But–”

“We’re dealing with things that feed on fear and can rewrite reality as they please, right? You said yourself that the feeling is all they care about. Maybe feeding it your fear just makes it easier for it to write your reality – in which case, accepting a hypothetical bad outcome as an inevitability is just creating a self-fulfilling prophecy for yourself.”

“That’s… certainly a theory,” he says cagily.

But it’s a theory that Basira must be invested in, because she leans forward, her eyes as bright and interested as when she’s engrossed in a good book or poring over some compelling research.

“Yes, it is, but I don’t think it’s too far-fetched. Georgie and I have been pooling ideas, and – I don’t think ‘mind over matter’ is a panacea, but mental state does seem to factor in. I was studying the statements you left for me, the ones involving anchors, and – I’m still not sure about the exact mechanics, but would an anchor help someone survive one of the Fears if state of mind *wasn’t* a key variable? It might not be the most important aspect, but it does seem significant enough to affect the outcome. Not all the time – not even most of the time – but in some cases, at least. Under the right circumstances.”

“And the Fears wouldn’t even exist without minds to experience them,” Jon says, brow furrowed. It’s uncanny, hearing some of the same ideas he bounced off of Daisy to pass the time in the Buried parroted back at him by Basira now.

“Exactly,” she says excitedly, then closes her mouth just as she’s taking a breath to start on her next thought. She clears her throat, looking slightly self-conscious. “I’m getting sidetracked. We can talk more about it later. For now – priorities.” Her expression turns sharp and focused again. “What should we do with the Coffin?”

“Artefact Storage. Tell them – tell them about the compulsion, make sure they take special precautions. Maximum security. No interaction or hands-on research.” He forces the words out rapid-fire, still expecting the Archive to take over any moment. “Store the key separately, same restrictions. No public cross-referencing; keep the link between the two on a need-to-know basis, preferably restricted to the head of the department. In – in fact, we can refer Sonja to case number 9982211. Joshua Gillespie had a rather – creative way of containing the key, if you recall. Simple, but” – Jon laughs, shaking his head – “incredibly effective.”

“That’s…”

“The best we can do without – well, burying it. Sealing it in concrete.”

“Not a bad idea,” Basira says thoughtfully. She raises an eyebrow when Jon doesn’t reply. “Is it?”

“I – I don’t know. *We* got out, and it seems – wrong, to completely eliminate that possibility for all the other people trapped in there.”

“You think you can help them?”

“I… I doubt it,” Jon admits, voice dripping with guilt.

He could *try,* but he suspects he was only able to reach Daisy because he had a personal connection to her, plus the recording of her voice to help him navigate. Finding anyone else in there would mean wandering around aimlessly until he eventually crossed paths with someone by chance, hoping he could reach them before the Buried whisked him away again.

“But if someone else does make it this far,” he says, “I don’t want to be the one responsible for the moment they try to lift the lid and find it cemented shut. The chains will still be there, but at least there’s a chance of someone – hearing them, helping them? Probably not, but – sealing it off entirely feels… I don’t know, final? Like we would be condemning them personally.”

“Yeah, okay.” Basira sighs heavily, absentmindedly stroking Daisy’s hair. “Point taken. Can you stand?”

“Not yet. Give me a few minutes. I’ll be fine here, though, if you want to move Daisy. Put some distance between her and the Coffin. It’s a good idea.”

“Don’t read my mind, Jon.”

“Sorry.”

“Are you sure you’ll be okay? I don’t feel right leaving you alone after…”

Jon meets her eyes again, tilting his head to the side slightly. Last time, Basira had no qualms about ushering Daisy away from the Coffin the moment she got a chance. She didn’t leave him alone for long – she wasn’t cruel – but still, he was undeniably a low priority. He clears his throat and tries to look less stunned.

“I’ll be alright, I promise. Go ahead.”

Basira watches him shrewdly, frowning as she considers her options. Eventually, she relents.

“If you’re sure. I won’t be gone long.”

“Careful moving her,” Jon says. “Sorry, that – probably goes without saying? But just – mind her left side. She has cracked ribs on both sides, but two on the left are broken.”

A flash of sympathetic pain and vicarious anger crosses Basira’s face.

“Thanks for the heads up.” Her voice is clipped, but not unkind. She’s simply trying to keep a tight rein on her emotions, Jon Knows: deal with the situation at hand first, break down later – in privacy – if at all. “As soon as I have her settled, I’ll come back and – and help you move.”

He nods tiredly.

“Jon.” Basira waits until he looks back up at her. “Thank you, for… I really thought I’d never – I…”

“Basira, it’s okay,” he says as she fumbles for words. “I know.”

“You know, or you Know?”

“Oh, uh…” Jon grimaces. “Maybe both? I’m sorry–”

Basira snorts and begins to gently position Daisy to be moved. “I was teasing.”

“O-oh. Right.” He shifts awkwardly. “Still, I – I apologize. I realize the Knowing can be – invasive, and – I don’t have as much control over it as I would like, but I should–”

“Jon, it’s fine.” Basira says it with an air of finality, but she doesn’t sound angry. “I’ll be back soon.”

“Sure,” he says, not quite knowing what to do with her lenience. “Thank you. I’ll just – wait here.”

“Yes, you will. You’ve met your self-sacrifice quota for the month. No more pocket dimensions. In fact–” She stands and swipes Jon’s phone off his desk where he left it, handing it down to him. “Call Georgie, let her know you’re home. Keep you occupied until I get back.”

As Basira leaves with Daisy, Jon does exactly that. Georgie picks up on the first ring.

“Jon? Jon, is that you?”

“Yeah, Georgie.” Jon closes his eyes and smiles at the sound of her voice. “It’s me. I’m back.”

“You got your voice back?”

“Seems so,” he says tentatively. “For now, anyway.”

Something about the tone of Georgie’s sigh tells him that she’s rolling her eyes at him.

“Why are you such a pessimist?”

“I’m not, I’m a–”

“Don’t you dare say ‘realist.’” Jon keeps his mouth shut. “Does Basira know you’re back?”

“Yes–”

“Are you hurt?”

“No – well, I mean, yes, but – nothing too serious. Nothing unexpected. I’m alright.”

“Okay. Did you find Daisy?”

“Yes. She’s with Basira now.”

“Good.” Georgie breathes a sigh of relief. “I was worried, Jon. Do you know how long you were gone?”

“I –” Jon pauses as the knowledge floods his mind. *“Oh.”*

“Yeah.”

“I’m – I’m sorry, Georgie, I really didn’t expect it to take – and it’s impossible to tell time in there, so–”

“It's alright, I’m just – glad you’re back. Did you let Martin know?”

“No, not – not yet, I – I’m not sure how he would feel about me contacting him.” Jon bites his lip. “Do you think I should?”

“Don’t know. He doesn’t seem to know what he wants. But I’ve spoken to him a few times now, and he seems to be – I don’t know. Thawing, I guess? Seems less cold. Easier to get through to him than it was that first time. Or – easier to get a rise out of him, at least. He’s actually got some fire in his eyes now.”

Jon smiles to himself again.

“Georgie Barker, are you *annoying* him out of the Lonely?”

“I–” She pauses, considers, and then chuckles. “You know – maybe? In my defense, it’s not difficult to do. He’s *very* moody.”

“O-oh. That’s…”

“Not necessarily a bad thing, Jon. I mean, it can’t be comfortable for him, but – at least he’s feeling something, interacting with the world around him? It’s like – well, he sort of reminds me of…”

“What?”

“Me, at certain points in my life? I think I’ve told you before, but – the lowest low of a depressive episode for me has always been when nothing can reach me. Feeling nothing,

wanting nothing, being unable to envision any sort of future at all and not even caring about it."

"You did, yes. I don't think I fully understood then, but now I – I think I have an idea."

"Well, when I start to get better, it can look like I'm getting *worse* to other people, because they can *see* the hurt, where before it was – quiet, subdued. All the things I couldn't feel before, they all come out at once, and it's – overwhelming, after so much nothingness. But it's part of the healing. At some point, you have to let yourself feel again, even if it hurts. I know it's not a perfect analogy, but – this might not be a bad sign, is what I'm saying. Sometimes recovery is messy. It helps to have someone to lean on for support."

"But if he's determined to be alone–"

"The thing is, I don't think he is. But that's something he needs to figure out for himself. I'm not saying you can't remind him from time to time that he isn't alone, but…" She exhales heavily. "You can't force someone to accept help. You reached out to him. Give him the space to reach back."

"So… *don't* contact him? Because – because I want to respect his boundaries, but–"

Georgie gives an exasperated but fond-sounding sigh.

"Jon, if you want a 'yes' or 'no' answer, I can't help you there."

"But – but what do you *think*–"

"I think it's your call. He might not respond, but… he's been worried, and I do think he would appreciate knowing you're back."

Jon makes a noncommittal noise.

“Well, you think on it,” Georgie says. “Listen, I’m walking out the door now, okay? Be there soon.”

“Oh, uh – right. I’ll – see you then, I suppose.”

“You’d better.”

When the call ends, Jon stares fixedly at a speck on the wall, debating whether or not to… what, send an email? That seems too impersonal, but a phone call might be too much. He could always text, but…

Glancing at the screen, he notices that he has several missed text messages. His thumb hovers uncertainly over the icon. It’s unlikely that any of them are from Martin, but he has an irrational need to prolong the confirmation one way or another, to put off *knowing* as long as–

The Eye informs him that they’re all from Naomi, and Jon heaves an agitated sigh. Not at the knowledge itself – he rather enjoys his conversations with Naomi, however sparse his input tends to be these days – but at having the option of knowing removed from him. When he starts to read her messages, though, his sour mood rapidly evaporates.

Naomi

Sun, Mar 4 10:14 PM
jonathan

what's this i hear about a coffin

you won't visit me in my empty grave but you'll climb into a coffin?? smh

anyway text me when you get back to let me know you're not dead

Tue, Mar 6 3:17 PM
maybe by the time you return from the spooky dirt dimension you’ll be tired enough to SLEEP

Fri, Mar 9 1:43 PM
jon you better come back alive, the duchess needs her godfather

if i die in a tragic lab accident someone will need to give her the pets she deserves

Sat, Mar 10 10:46 AM
btw i have a queue of duchess photos for you and i will dispense one (1) for every cat emoji you send

how's THAT for an anchor

Today 2:38 PM
😸😸😸😸😸😸😸😸

“There,” he says with a private little smile. “One for each day I was gone. To start with.”

Once he sends the reply, he sets the phone aside. His mouth is dry, the taste of dirt clinging to his tongue. Luckily, he thought ahead and stored some water bottles here for when he got back, knowing it would take some time before he was ready to drag himself to the break room for a drink. *Unluckily,* he’d been so preoccupied with all his other preparations in the half-hour prior to entering the Coffin that he hadn’t had the foresight to put them within easier reach. As it is, they’re still stored in the hollow under his desk.

He’s sore and stiff and lethargic, but the prospect of washing the grit out of his mouth is enticing enough to get him moving. Gingerly, awkwardly, he shuffles around to the other side of the desk. It’s slow going; he practically has to drag himself, and he spares a moment to be glad that no one is here to watch him.

Well. Except the Eye, he supposes. And possibly Jonah.

A noticeable chill shivers through him and his breath catches in his throat. Jon shakes his head to rid himself of the thought. He *really* needs to stop giving Jonah Magnus real estate in his head.

Just as Jon gets a grip on one of the bottles, his phone dings from where he left it on the floor. He bumps his head on the underside of the desk when he starts – not as hard as he did in the Coffin, but enough to send a new wave of pain coursing through him from head to toe. The phone dings several times more in quick succession.

“Okay, alright, give me a minute, Naomi,” he grumbles, rubbing the sore spot at the top of his head. No blood, but there’s definitely a bump. It won’t be there for long. He should be glad for his healing abilities, he supposes, inhuman though they may be.

The text messages continue pouring in as he makes the return journey to his previous spot.

“Guess she really is sending a photo per emoji,” he says to himself. The alert goes off once more just as he reaches for it. “Or more than one.”

When he glimpses the screen, it’s not Naomi’s name that he sees.

Martin is typing up the new rota that Peter requested when it happens.

Seemingly out of nowhere, a tape recorder drops onto his desk with a loud clack. Before he can spare a thought on its sudden appearance, another comes plummeting down, smashing two of his fingers against the keyboard.

“Ow! What the–”

Another collides with the top of his head, and on impulse he covers himself with both arms. Four more fall – one glancing his elbow, three clattering to the floor around him – and then there’s a lull. Cautiously, he brings his arms down and looks to the ceiling, half-expecting more to come raining down. When none do, he relaxes somewhat.

“Huh,” he says to himself, bewildered. *“That’s* new.”

He’s used to the tape recorders materializing, of course, but usually it’s only one or two at a time, and they don't drop from the ceiling. They just *appear* – sometimes sitting in plain sight, but more often slightly hidden from view: under his chair, behind his computer, once in a potted plant in the breakroom. They always click and whir to announce their presence – as if they want to be found, as if to reassure him that they aren’t trying to spy unnoticed.

Martin rolls his eyes at himself. Why is he always anthropomorphizing them, assuming they have intentions?

In any case, being pelted with a tape recorder shower is unprecedented. He rubs his hand where the second recorder hit him, then his head. He’s bound to have bruises, and his fingers are already swelling up.

“What the *hell,* Jon?”

Before he even realizes what he’s doing, he has his phone in his hand and he’s tapping out a text message.

Jon 🌷

Today 2:40 PM
7 tape recorders fell from the ceiling onto my desk in the last 5 minutes

shit

make that 9

He briefly contemplates taking shelter under his desk. When no more fall, he turns his attention back to his phone.

i'm trying to figure out what it means. like some delphic oracle trying to divine the future with bird entrails or something. was that a thing or am i making that up?

i’m sure you’d know. not like you’re here to answer

i don't even know if this is still your number. guess it doesn’t matter, you didn't bring your

phone with you into the coffin

and you wouldn't get service in there anyway

probably

Martin leans back with a sigh, dragging one hand down his face. What is he doing? It's not like Jon is waiting by the phone for him.

Maybe that's exactly why he's doing this. It certainly highlights the loneliness. He probably *wouldn't* be texting Jon if there was any chance of him answering, would he?

In the span of a blink, that loneliness turns to frustration. For months, his emotions have been dulled, almost to the point of numbness. Things were *quiet.* It felt comfortable; it felt right; it felt *safe,* the fog blanketing the world and muffling all of its sharp edges, shielding him from all the things that used to leave him hurt and grieving and wanting.

Then Jon went and ripped that blanket off him, leaving him exposed all over again. Ever since, it's been nothing but sensory overload and raw emotion that doesn't even have a *name.* All he knows is that it's too much and it's all at once and he has nowhere to put it, and it's manifesting as irritability and mood swings and a pervasive, indistinct sense of *hurt* that he thought he'd left behind.

He feels *everything* after months of feeling next to *nothing,* as if all the things he wouldn't allow himself to feel are being regurgitated all at once in a nebulous chaotic tangle, and he isn't equipped to handle it–

"Alone," he says aloud. That's it, isn't it? It's too much to cope with on his own. He is alone, and for the first time in what feels like forever, that scares him.

Biting his lip until he tastes blood, he picks up his phone again.

why did you have to go in there

i was so sure about everything. i knew what i needed to do, i accepted that. it felt right. then

you go and pull the rug out from under me, and you aren't even there to catch me.

i already grieved for you once, and now you're going to make me do it all over again? after saying all those things? what am i supposed to do with that? where does that leave me, if you never come back?

you can't just turn everything upside down and leave me alone to pick up the pieces again

He blinks back tears. It feels wrong, unloading all of this onto Jon, but he'll never see it, so what does it matter? It has to go *somewhere* or Martin is going to shatter.

i wish i could just go back to being numb, but i don't even have that anymore. the fog doesn't feel safe like it used to. now it's just cold

and i want to be angry with you for that and i guess i am but mostly i just

i want you to be safe

can't you just be safe for once

Martin stops mid-rant, mind going blank when the typing indicator pops up. For a seemingly interminable amount of time, he holds his breath, watching as it stops and starts and hesitates before finally–

Martin, I'm home now. I just got back less than a half hour ago. I should have messaged you straight away but I wasn't sure if you wanted to hear from me, and I'm sorry for leaving you without a proper explanation but I didn't think you wanted to see me

That sounded accusatory didn't it

I didn't mean it like that I swear

I'm not upset

I mean I am but not with you

Fuck. I'm doing this all wrong

And before Martin realizes it, there's a tearful, slightly manic laugh bubbling up in his chest and out through his mouth and he's crying, *when did he start crying?* He's giving himself whiplash with his own erratic moods, but it doesn't matter, because he can just picture how

frantic Jon is right now, stumbling over his words, mussing up his hair and muttering to himself. Martin probably shouldn't find it so endearing, but when has that ever stopped him?

Let me try again

I'm sorry. For making you worry, for leaving you alone, for being terrible with words, for how poorly I treated you for so long, and for so much else besides

I miss you, and I'm worried about you, and it's been too long since I last saw your face

I meant everything I said in the message I left, but you deserve more of an explanation than I was able to give. I have use of my own words right now. Mostly. But I don't know how long that will last. Can we meet in person? I understand if the answer is no, I promised to leave you alone if that's what you want. I won't pretend to like it, but I will respect it.

This is still coming out all wrong. It isn't my intention to guilt you. I just need you to know that if you want to talk, I'm here. If you need more time, I'll wait, and I'll be here when you're ready. If you want me to stay away, I'll respect your decision.

And if you want me to stop talking immediately, I'll understand that too, because I am certainly rambling and almost certainly making an annoyance of myself, and in fact at this point me shutting up would likely be a blessing for both of us.

Martin rubs furiously at the tears streaking down his cheeks, sniffling. He's debating on responding to save Jon from his own self-consciousness when another few messages come through.

To the point: I want you to be safe, too. You deserve better than the Lonely, I'm here if/when you need me, I trust you, and I love you. I really, really do.

Okay. I'll give you some space now.

Apologies for the barrage of texts

and tape recorders I suppose? I would give you an explanation if I had one but the Eye would rather give me unsolicited spider facts than answer the questions I actually ask. For example, it has just helpfully reminded me that the goliath birdeater tarantula is the largest spider in the world and that it does in fact eat birds on occasion. I'm certain you already knew that. I wish I didn't.

Martin can't help it: he starts laughing again. Then immediately feels a bit bad about it. He doesn't have much time to dwell on it before the next message comes through.

Hmm. I have just been additionally informed that it rarely bites humans, but as a defense mechanism it CAN release urticating hairs from its abdomen, resulting in painful rashes and irritation to the mucous membranes. There's a specific medical condition that occurs when the bristles become lodged in the cornea or conjunctiva. It's called opthalmia nodosa if you were interested. I certainly wasn't.

Martin I know spiders are important to the ecosystem but have you also considered that they are malevolent little terrors and I hate them

"Jon," Martin says, shaking his head in fond amusement.

This is a side of him that Martin has always adored: how easily he gets sidetracked and carried away with his rambling, his tendency to trip over his words when he's excited, the informational diatribes he launches into at the drop of a hat.

And now Martin's tearing up again.

"God, what's *wrong* with me," he sniffs, rubbing at his eyes with his sleeve again.

I'm babbling again

Sorry

I

really wish I could unsend texts

Okay. Shutting up for real this time.

Sorry again

❤️

It's the heart that does it. Martin doesn't know why – it's such a little thing – but that last ounce of doubt evaporates and his reticence crumbles, just like that. The transition is unexpectedly gentle: an easy slip from one state into another, like stepping into a well-worn shoe, a stark contrast to the dramatic, jarring shift he would have anticipated.

He begins typing out a response.

huh. i think that's the first time i've ever seen you use an emoji

Martin! I didn't expect you to respond

I mean, I'm glad to hear from you

I'm surprised is all

Apologies, I didn't consider that the heart might be too forward until after I'd already sent it

I also apologize for the mildly aggressive spider trivia. It's been some time since I last had a chance to talk to you and I suppose I got carried away

Martin smiles into his hand, pressed to his lips. He's always found it cute, if a bit silly, how stilted Jon can be sometimes, even when speaking through such an informal medium.

And the idea that an emoji is somehow more forward than an *overt declaration of love* is just…

relax, jon.

Right. Sorry

it's fine. and yes i think we should meet. i still haven't made any decisions, but we have a lot to talk about and texting probably isn't the best place for that.

Really?

I mean, yes, I would like to meet, obviously, I suggested it

Sorry, that sounded irate. It wasn't intended that way

I'm a bit scattered. Adrenaline hasn't worn off quite yet

Martin's heart glitches at the reminder of what Jon must have just gone through. If he really is more receptive to help now, maybe he can be persuaded to actually rest and recover for once, but Martin doesn't have his hopes up.

i know, dw about it

Thank you. About meeting: as I'm sure Georgie explained, there are things we can't discuss outside of the tunnels.

yeah we can meet there. later, though. i'll text you when peter's least likely to notice i've gone AWOL. he'll probably find out i contacted you eventually, but i want to avoid him actually following me and listening in on us if i can.

Of course. I'll keep my phone on me

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me, Martin. It means a lot. I've missed you

getting lots of thanks and apologies from you in this conversation

They are all well-deserved and long overdue

if you say so

I know so. And I mean it, I'm very happy to hear from you. Thank you.

oh

well. thank you for coming home?

Martin can feel the flush creeping up his neck and onto his face.

listen i should get back to work in case peter comes by. see you soon

I look forward to it.

stay safe until then, won't you?

That is certainly the plan.

Don't worry, the Coffin is being quiet now.

"Wait," Martin says, squinting down at his phone screen. "Is he still…"

jon are you still near that thing???

Yes? It's dormant

“Unbelievable.” Martin huffs an incredulous laugh. “He is *unbelievable*.”

that’s not the point. you just went through a traumatic experience, none of you should be anywhere near that thing. i would think basira would

wait. are you alone right now?

do the others even know you’re back??????

Yes

to which question

Martin groans when the three dots repeatedly disappear and reappear.

the amount of typing i’m seeing is NOT encouraging

I am the only one in the room right now, but the office door is open and I can hear Basira’s voice down the hall, so I’m technically not alone-alone. Daisy passed out as soon as we got back, she needed to be moved someplace safer. I can’t quite walk on my own right now, but Basira will be back any moment to help me. I’m just catching my breath. I’ll be fine.

that isn’t as reassuring as you think it is

text me as soon as basira gets back. if i don’t hear from you in five minutes i’m coming down there myself

Oh

I mean, yes I will

Actually here she is now. I’m sorry for worrying you

you aren’t just saying that so i don’t keep worrying right

No, I wouldn’t lie about that

oh really???? mr. “oh it’s just a flesh wound from a BREAD KNIFE”???

That’sZf j

“That’s a lot of typing for just fixing a typo,” Martin says, tapping his foot impatiently. “Go on, Jon, spit it out.”

Martin, this is Basira. I'm not going to stand here and wait while you two bicker. Jon will text you back once I bridal carry him to a slightly less sinister location. Georgie will be here soon to bully him into resting. In the meantime, feel free to continue itemizing his embarrassing lies. Or draft a persuasive essay on why he should have a kip. Who knows, maybe he'll even listen to you.

oh. alright then

Martin rubs the back of his neck and tries to ignore the heat pooling in his cheeks and along the tops of his ears. One good thing about the Lonely: it all but eliminated his embarrassing tendency to broadcast his emotions to the world with a blush. Or maybe it just made it so that there wasn't much to broadcast in the first place.

"So much for that," he mutters sheepishly.

By necessity, Martin has learned to be adaptable. If circumstances have changed this drastically, he needs to reconsider his trajectory. Steeped in some disorientating mixture of emotion – mortification, giddiness, fear, relief, regret, and so much else he still can't put a name to – he watches the clock and quietly starts to review his options.

Chapter End Notes

- hhhhhh hopefully you're all okay with a slow-moving plot bc I have a feeling I'm going to continue drawing out the character-focused stuff?? (I know where the story's going but my outline is extremely loose, which means my pacing has a personality of its own.)

- Citations for Jon's Archive-speak: MAG 144; 054/020/083; 002; 060/019

- re: Archive-speak – I do plan on explaining the newest development more, I just didn't get to it in this chapter. But expect more original dialogue from Jon from here on out, with some Archive-speak mixed in.

- I used this lovely guide to help me puzzle through creating a workskin so I could format the text messages properly. (On which point, I hope the texting isn't OOC. I admittedly had a bit too much fun with it. Especially Jon's. He said ADHD!Jon rights and I agreed.)

- Fun fact: Naomi and Jon have a system wherein any cat emoji translates to “Duchess status update, please”. It’s good she takes a lot of photos, because Jon makes judicious use of the cat emoji. Having a bad time? 🐱 Can’t sleep? 🐱 Bored? 🐱 Just looking for something to distract himself from the mortifying ordeal of Knowing and being Known? 🐱
Of course, she sends a lot of photos unprompted, too, as any new Enthusiastic Cat Parent is wont to do.

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

What Comes After

Chapter Summary

With the Coffin dealt with and the Lonely losing its grip, Jon and Martin have to answer a daunting question: *What now?*

Chapter Notes

CWs for Chapter 15: mentions of Buried-related trauma (claustrophobia, etc.); a somewhat lengthy discussion of recurrent suicidal ideation (including some informal safety planning); panic/anxiety symptoms; mild self-harm (as a stim to distract from anxiety/intrusive thoughts); past blood/injury (including worm mentions); swears; mentions of starvation & restrictive behaviors re: Jon's statement dependence (also some internalized ableism re: compulsions & the substance dependence/addiction parallels); internalized victim blaming; post-traumatic stress reactions/flashbacks re: Jonah-typical awfulness.

Also, apologies in advance, but ADHD!Jon Went Off for several paragraphs at one point in this chapter and I (and by extension Martin) just let him run with it. ¯_(ツ)_/¯

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jon sits on the floor with his back to the wall, waiting as Basira helps Daisy wash away nearly eight months of grime. Through the closed door and underneath the rapid drumbeat of water, he can make out a steady stream of murmured conversation, punctuated by the occasional sob or bitten-back groan of pain. The words are indistinct, but Jon doesn't need to hear or even Know what is being said to guess the gist of it.

Eventually, the shower turns off. It takes several more minutes before the door opens. Even though Jon knows what to expect, he has to suppress a sympathetic grimace when he lays eyes on Daisy.

She sits hunched forward on the closed toilet lid, damp hair hanging limp around her face and dripping onto the tile floor. There is a sickly pallor to her skin, mottled with bruising and scrubbed-raw patches of pink. The clothes she's wearing are her own – Basira never could bring herself to discard Daisy's things – but they no longer fit. Her shirt practically drowns

her emaciated frame now, hanging loose off of one shoulder and exposing the hollows of her collarbone. The dark shadows under her puffy, bloodshot eyes might just rival Jon's.

"Better?" Jon gives her a weak half-smile.

"Cleaner," Daisy says hoarsely, staring listlessly at the floor.

"Your turn." Basira catches Jon's eye and jerks her head back towards the shower. "Left the shower stool in there for you. Clean clothes are on the counter."

"Thanks," Jon says, but he doesn't move. Part of his brain is telling him to stand; another, more reasonable part is just now realizing that sitting on the floor in the first place was probably a bad idea.

"Do you, uh – need help?"

"No," Jon says hurriedly, "that – won't be necessary."

"No, I wasn't suggesting–" Basira sighs, flustered. "I just meant that maybe you want to wait until Georgie gets here?"

Now that the adrenaline is fading, Jon's skin is crawling with every moment the Buried still clings to him. Even though he can breathe, it still feels as though his nasal passages and sinuses and lungs are clogged with soil. It's caked under his fingernails, plastered on his skin, and matted in his hair. The loamy taste of it lingers on his tongue. Grit still clings to his eyelashes, stings in his eyes, and sticks between his teeth. Every slight movement sends loose dirt raining down onto the floor. He *needs* a shower, needs to wash away the seemingly endless supply of cloying, crushing earth.

"If you could just help me stand up, I should be able to handle the rest."

Quickly recovering from the awkward moment, Basira gives a curt nod and hauls Jon to his feet. Steadying himself against the wall with one hand, he tests putting weight on his bad leg.

"Daisy still needs to see a doctor, and–" Basira frowns, watching Jon wince as he takes a step forward. "Are you sure you'll be alright? You're not going to pass out and drown in two inches of water, are you?"

It wouldn't kill me, Jon tries to say, wry and only half-joking.

"Not enough to kill me outright," he says instead. When he feels that familiar static-laden filter slide into place in his mind, he freezes. Before the fear can properly move in, though, Basira's voice cuts through his stirring panic.

"You're alright, Jon," she says, authoritative but without heat. "Just breathe through it, remember?"

Jon nods distractedly, shutting his eyes and focusing on his own breathing. It takes a minute, but the pressure eventually eases enough for him to hear himself think again.

"Are you okay?" Daisy asks, brow furrowed.

"Yes. Sorry." Just those two simple words are a struggle to vocalize, but once he manages, the rest of the weight lifts from his thoughts. He glances at Basira. "I'm sorry, it just – slipped out, and–"

"It's fine." Basira looks him up and down. "I think maybe you should wait for Georgie, though."

"I'll be fine. It's just my leg, and I'm used to dealing with that on my own."

"I thought you injured your ribs."

“Archivist,” Jon says with a shrug – a mistake, he realizes a moment too late, as it disturbs his injuries. He just barely manages to avoid flinching. “I heal quickly.”

The truth is, his ribs are unlikely to fully heal until he gets a statement in him. In fact, the last time, his weakness only started to fade after he’d hunted down a live statement. He’d rather not dwell on that right now, though.

“Hm.” Basira fixes him with a skeptical look.

“I’ll be alright, I promise. You should see to Daisy.”

“No,” Daisy says. Both Basira and Jon glance at her. A noticeable full-body shiver sweeps over her, and Basira grabs a dry towel from the small stack on the counter.

“You need *professional* medical attention,” Basira says firmly, wrapping the towel around Daisy and adjusting it to cover her bare arms. “I’m taking you to A&E.”

Daisy ignores her, raising her head to look at Jon instead.

“I was thinking I could – stay, if you want?” She casts her eyes down again and her voice drops to a low murmur. “It’s just – the shower, it’s – a tight space, and – and it might…”

Jon bites the inside of his cheek. It’s true: the shower stall is tiny. Claustrophobic. The room itself is small and poorly ventilated; steam builds up within a minute of the shower being turned on, turning the air thick and stifling with humidity. The single dim light in the ceiling has a tendency to flicker; the bulb has been known to come loose from time to time, plunging the area into near-darkness.

It isn’t the Buried, but there’s enough here to bring the Coffin to mind on a bad day – and especially right now, less than two hours out of the place.

The last time, Daisy never could manage to use the shower without someone else in the room to keep her company. When Basira was unavailable, she would turn to Jon. Eventually, he got comfortable with her returning the favor. It became a routine, but…

"I'll be okay," he says again. Unconvincingly, judging from the way Daisy's eyes narrow at him.

"Do you really want to be alone right now?"

"I…"

No, I don't. I really, really don't.

"Look, I'm not trying to make it weird," Daisy continues, fiddling with one corner of her towel. "It's not like I'll see you through the curtain. I just thought – maybe you could use some company? Don't say 'I'm fine,'" she says as he opens his mouth to respond. "Just because you *can* deal with it alone doesn't mean you should have to."

"Well, yes, but–"

"Do you *not* want me here? Because if you really want me to leave, I will, but–"

"No, I wouldn't mind the company, honestly, but–"

"Then I'll stay." Daisy looks at Basira, as if daring her to object.

Last time, she did object, Jon remembers. Now, though… Basira simply sighs.

“Fine. But,” she adds emphatically, giving Daisy a severe look, “I’m taking you to A&E as soon as Georgie gets here, and you don’t get to argue.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Daisy says with a tired grin.

“Liar,” Basira says, shaking her head with a fond, amused sort of resignation. “I’ll be just outside if you need me.”

As Basira leaves, Jon catches Daisy’s eye.

“Thank you,” he murmurs.

“Thank you,” Daisy says at the exact same time. “For not leaving me there.”

Their tentative, exhausted smiles are mirror images of one another as understanding passes between them.

Someone upstairs has a statement.

The Archivist Knew the moment she mounted the steps to the Institute. She was marked by the Spiral, the Hunt, and the Lonely in quick succession, but the Archivist can only barely make out the edges of the story: how she was pursued through a nonsensical, constantly-shifting maze of alleyways by a hulking thing that always stayed one step behind, never letting her escape but never deigning to actually catch her.

There was no one in that place to hear her screams. Now, all she wants is to be heard.

The Archivist can give that to her. It would be so easy, so *right.* She came to the Magnus Institute of her own volition, didn't she? She's here to give her statement. The Archivist can take it from her and preserve her voice and keep her story alive for the rest of–

Jon twists his fingers in his hair and pulls until it hurts.

"You need to sit down," Georgie says for the third time in as many minutes.

"Just keeping warm."

It's not necessarily a lie. The perpetual damp chill of the tunnels seeps into Jon's bones in spite of his three layers of clothing and Georgie's scarf wrapped twice around his neck. Beyond that, though, fevered movement is the only thing keeping him from falling to pieces. If he stops or slows, it will become all the more obvious how badly he's trembling and all the more difficult to ignore the hunger gnawing away at him.

"You're not even pacing, you're just – *limping*." When he doesn't reply, Georgie reaches out and touches his shoulder. "Sit. We have some time before Martin gets here."

With a sigh, Jon finally capitulates, sinking into the nearest chair. Immediately, he starts to jiggle one leg, fingers tapping restlessly on his knees.

"Talk to me, Jon," Georgie says, taking a seat opposite him. "What's on your mind?"

"I… I don't know. It's – a lot, and…"

He trails off, unsettled at the sound of his own voice, shaking almost as badly as the rest of him. His mouth has gone too dry to comfortably swallow, and every passing thought feels blurry around the edges, too ephemeral to translate into the spoken word. The only thing coming through loud and clear is the *need* and the knowledge that he has the means to sate it, if he would only *embrace* it.

He doesn't have the words to describe the experience, nor does he wish to verbalize it in the first place. As for the rest of it…

“Of course now I *can* talk,” he says with a weak laugh, “I suddenly don’t know what to say.”

“Take your time.”

Jon hunches forward, allowing himself to rock back and forth in slight movements as he tries to gather his thoughts.

“I’m–” *Hungry. Terrified. Exhausted. Weak. Hungry, craving, needing, wanting*– “At a loss.”

“About why you can talk again?”

Yes. Sure. He can go with that. It isn’t a lie, and it feels like a safer topic than all the rest.

“In part. I don’t understand *why* I have my voice back, or what that means, and of course my mind is immediately going to the worst-case explanations, and” – now he’s started, he rapidly gains momentum, his speech growing pressured and frantic – “I should just be grateful that I can use my own words again, but I can’t just *let it go*, because when have I *ever* been able to just let something go, and–” He tugs on a lock of hair again, letting out a self-deprecating chuckle. “Unsurprisingly, I hate not knowing.”

“Well… how about starting with that? Give me some theories. Might help to get them out of your head for a minute.”

“Most of it comes down to… I don’t know – *why now*, I suppose? I don’t have an answer to that, which just makes me think – did I have a choice all along?” It’s a question that has been plaguing him for hours, sitting poised and ready to spring in the back of his mind, but as he

finally speaks it aloud, a chill comes over him. His voice fractures like a crack spreading weblike through thin ice. “This whole time, was I just… not trying hard enough?”

“I don’t think–”

“It was the same with taking statements,” Jon blurts out, wide-eyed and wound taut. “When the others discovered what I was doing, I *stopped,* which means I – I could have done all along, and just – *didn’t*.”

“You implied before that you were sort of – influenced?” Georgie’s voice is thoughtful, not accusatory; her expression searching, but not judgmental. Jon can feel his shoulders relax just slightly.

“‘Influenced’ is one way to put it, yes. But not *controlled*, exactly – not quite. It was – instinctual, almost? And once a story starts, it’s sort of like – being in a trance, I suppose.”

“I remember you having a kind of… faraway look to you, when I was telling you my story.”

“It wasn’t like that in the very beginning,” he says, watching his fingers curl on his bouncing knees. “I don’t know when they started having that effect on me. I… didn’t even notice the change. Didn’t notice that I was physically dependent on them until I was traveling. Started to get sick the longer I went without them. And when I woke up… just reading statements wasn’t enough anymore.” He draws in a measured breath. Gathers his thoughts. Exhales slowly. “The first time, I was just shopping. I felt – unwell, hazy. Then he was there, and I just – *asked,* before I even realized what was happening. The next time was just after Melanie stabbed me–”

“She *what?”*

“It was – sort of deserved,” Jon says, waving it off. He continues before Georgie can get another word in. “I felt – drained, after. Thought I just needed some air, so I went for a walk. Wasn’t long before I crossed paths with my next – victim. Didn’t realize until much later that I must have been… hunting, subconsciously. Like a fugue, almost. But just before I Asked, I

had this moment where I – I *knew* what I was about to do, and I just – did it anyway. And then the third time was–"

"After the Coffin," Georgie guesses. The look on her face is that mixture of sadness and pity that haunted Jon in their shared nightmares for so long.

"Yes." Jon keeps his eyes downcast. "And the fourth time was after I – well, I tried too hard to Know something, and it sort of – took it out of me."

"So the trigger is being injured, or weakened?"

"Maybe in the beginning. The last time, though… I was feeling weak, yes, but there was no specific incident that precipitated it. Basira needed me at full strength for a mission. So I Knew where I could find a statement, and I made sure to be in the right place at the right time." He wrings his hands in his lap. "But the mission was just the way I rationalized it to myself. I was just hungry. I would've fed regardless, and reached for whatever excuse was closest to hand, and felt guilty later, and – well, rinse and repeat."

"You didn't quite answer when I asked before, but… is it an addiction, or is it sustenance?"

"It's a… need." Jon bites his lip in thought. "Feels like addiction sometimes, but the compulsion is worse than nicotine cravings ever were. And when I tried to stop, it – it wasn't only withdrawal. I actually was starving. Still don't know if it would have actually killed me, but…" He shrugs. "Suppose we'll find out."

"Jon–"

"But I – I need you to understand," Jon says, jolting up straight in his seat. "I'm not making excuses. I'm *done* making excuses, there *are* no excuses, just – explanations. I was influenced, yes, and it often felt like being – enthralled, but I still… I *knew* that I was dangerous, that what I was doing was wrong. If I thought I couldn't help myself, I should've told the others from the start and they would've done what was necessary. I always felt ashamed after, but I still – *kept* doing it, until I was forced to stop."

Did he ever stop? If not for his encounters with Breekon and Jared Hopworth and Manuela Dominguez, would Jon have been hungrier, hunted more frequently, accrued even more victims? And just how much did gorging himself on Peter Lukas' statement sustain Jon through those first couple of weeks at the safehouse? The relative peace of those days had been haunted by an undercurrent of *need* that grew louder with every passing day. By the end of the first week, Jon no longer trusted himself to visit the village, even with Martin's supervision. The final few days before Basira's shipment of statements arrived had been torturous. Would he have lasted that long if not for Peter's statement? How much longer could he have gone without feeding the Eye? Which would have come first: starvation or relapse? Would instinct have taken over at some point, sent him prowling on autopilot? Or would he have knowingly given in to the hunger, just as he had before?

Jon never had to learn the answers to those questions, never had to test the true limits of his resolve and capacity for self-control. When the box of statements was finally delivered, the short-lived relief was marred by resentment (that the need existed in the first place, that he had allowed himself to stray so far from humanity); by trepidation (over whether he really could subsist entirely on stale statements, whether he was only prolonging the inevitable); by grief (that the Beholding should permeate every aspect of his existence, that it should intrude on what should be a refuge). For a moment, though, it seemed that things would be *okay*, at least for the immediate future.

Until Jon read a statement – one that ensured that he would always be well-fed. And there was a hated, feared, *monstrous* part of him that was *relieved* at that knowledge – that looked upon that fresh new nightmare world and thought it *right.*

"I didn't just need it, Georgie, I *wanted* it. I – I *liked* it. It felt *good*. And I know for a fact that it still would, if I let myself do it again. I've seen the consequences of becoming – *that,* and I still…" His shoulders sag. "I miss it. I'm afraid I'll never stop wanting it, I hate myself for that, and it changes *nothing*."

"You're hungry now, aren't you?" Georgie asks gently.

Jon *tsks* and pinches the bridge of his nose. "That obvious, is it?"

“Mm.” She gives him a sympathetic smile. “You seem more jittery than usual. And you’re shaking.”

“Ravenous,” he says with a bitter laugh. “Worst I’ve been in a – a long while, and it’s only going to get worse.”

He lets his gaze drift to the floor as he briefly debates whether to share the details. *She should probably know what manner of monster she’s dealing with.*

“Actually, ah – someone upstairs has a statement,” he says before he can lose his nerve. “She was writing it out just before we came down here, and I could See the *shape* of it, but not the whole story, and now I can’t See her anymore, and I – I *need*–” He runs a frustrated hand through his hair, scraping ragged fingernails against his scalp. “Christ, Georgie, it’s all I can do not to rush up there and rip it out of her.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault.”

“Not yours, either. Don’t,” Georgie says, cutting him off when he opens his mouth to launch into another tirade. “I’m not saying that you were justified in hurting people. But you didn’t choose to be… this.”

“I may not have wanted it,” he says flatly, “but I *did* choose it.”

“How so?”

She sounds genuinely curious, not confrontational, which keeps him from going on the defensive. Instead, the question gives Jon pause.

“I… I don’t know how to explain it,” he says slowly, frowning. “Just – something Jonah said to me, and it – feels right.”

“He said that to you?” Georgie’s eyes narrow as she watches him. “Those words?”

“Yes?” Jon squirms in his seat. Sometimes, Georgie’s scrutiny is on par with that of the Beholding. “A long time ago. Before the Unknowing, even. When I realized that I was becoming something – not human, and confronted him about it.”

Georgie taps a knuckle against her lips, looking down at the floor in thought.

“Jon, I’m going to say something, and I want you to think about it – *really* think about it, don’t just discard it offhand. Alright?”

“Okay?” Jon says, apprehension flooding him.

Georgie takes a breath and looks him in the eye. “Supernatural flavor aside, that’s just how abusers talk in order to groom their victims.”

Jon recoils as if struck and shoves the information away from him as soon as the words leave her mouth.

“Does it really matter?” It comes out far more harshly than he had intended, closer to a shout than a comment, and he cringes. “Sorry. It’s just – he had a point.”

“Jon–”

“No, I *chose* to keep looking for answers at every turn,” Jon says, gesticulating wildly. “I’ve never known when to just *stop*, no matter how many times people get hurt from it. I was a perfect fit for the Beholding, the perfect candidate for Jonah to do with what he will, and I – I

still am. Doesn't matter if I wanted this outcome. I still sought it out. Moth to a fucking flame."

"Doesn't mean you chose it, and it doesn't mean you deserved what happened to you," Georgie says. For some reason that Jon can't quite pinpoint, the quiet confidence with which she speaks grates on his nerves. "Anyway, it seems to me you're doing a decent job at controlling yourself now."

"Yeah," Jon scoffs. "Only it took Basira threatening to kill me."

"She *what?"*

"Not recently. In my future. It was warranted," he says with a dismissive gesture. Then he sighs, slouching in his seat. "And I don't know if even that threat would have stopped me forever. Didn't have to find out. I managed to end the world first, and then I had all the fear I could ever want."

The moment he stops speaking, his mind once again drifts to the statement ripe for the taking just upstairs. His bitter expression turns anguished and he buries his face in his hands.

"I want to kill the part of me that misses it. That might just kill all of me, but honestly, Georgie, I don't – I don't know if that would be such a bad thing–" He chokes on his words and looks up at her with wide, frantic eyes. "I – I'm sorry, I didn't – I shouldn't have said–" He takes a deep breath and forces assurance into his voice when he says, "I'm not suicidal."

"I won't be angry if you are," Georgie says evenly, "if that's what you're worried about."

"I'm not suicidal," he says again, but he looks away as he does, unable to meet her eyes. "I don't… *want* to die. I just feel like as long as I'm around, everyone – every*thing* is in danger, and – what right do I have to make that decision for the world? It's – selfish, and – I really don't deserve a second chance, especially when part of me still…"

Jon swallows hard. Once again, he wonders if the woman with the statement is still here. He pinches the skin of his arm and twists. Noticing the tic, Georgie frowns and opens her mouth to redirect him, but he carries on speaking, undeterred.

"I think the only reason I chose to wake up again is because I needed to help Daisy and Martin. I think the only reason I'm still here now is because I don't want to leave Martin alone. Or – no, that makes it sound out of obligation or – or guilt. It's not that. It's – I – I want to *be* with him, I do. I actively want to – to have a life with him, just – live, *be*. If not for that, though, I… I'm *tired*, Georgie."

Tired of hurting and being hurt, of watching and being watched. Tired of hunger and want and an existence that hinges upon the misery of others. Tired loss and scars and nightmares. Tired of having to settle for *not wanting to die* instead of *wanting to live*. Tired of *just surviving* instead of actually *living.*

"I'm just tired," he says, putting his head in his hands again. "I'm sorry. I know you don't want to hear this."

"I would rather you talk about it than keep it bottled up."

"I just don't want you to think that I'm not trying to get better."

"Recovery isn't linear. I'm not going to leave just because you have bad days. It would be different if you were closed off, denying you have a problem, but… you're not." When Jon doesn't answer, Georgie's frown deepens. Her next words sound almost affronted. "I've *been* suicidal, Jon, you *know* that. Why do you think I'd hold it against you? I *know* you can't just flip a switch to make it go away. Why are you so afraid–" Realization dawns on her face. "I left last time, didn't I?"

"I never regained autonomy in the nightmares, so I didn't get a chance to talk to you before I woke up." Jon shrugs halfheartedly. "You didn't *expect* me to wake up. Then I did, and I didn't have any of the complications to be expected from a six-months coma. Not even a coma, really, just – everything *but* brain dead. A corpse coming back to life – I think it was too much for you. You told me I needed people to keep me human, and by the time I took that advice there was no one left to turn to, and I wasn't human anymore anyway. It kept me from dying, but you didn't think it was a second chance."

“I *said* that to you?”

“The, uh, last bit,” he says reluctantly. He doesn’t blame Georgie for leaving, but he can’t deny that her parting words to him on that day still sting, even now – a resounding condemnation that he can’t quite shake. “But you weren’t wrong,” he says, rushing to reassure her when he sees the horrified look on her face. “It *wasn’t* a second chance, it was just… the next phase of the Archivist’s development. Anyway, you were tired of watching me self-destruct, you knew there was nothing you could to do change my trajectory, and you didn’t want me to drag you down with me. Or Melanie. Her life had – *has,* I suppose – been nothing but misery since the day she met me. She was trying to get out, to get better.”

“And you?”

“I *wanted* to, but I just… couldn’t see a way out. I couldn’t leave, but I…” He bites down hard on his lower lip, struggling with his next words. “I don’t think I was choosing to stay involved, either.”

“And I thought you were.”

“You weren’t the only one. And it wasn’t an unfair assumption. I was” – *am,* his brain corrects – “in too deep. I didn’t” – *don’t*, he reminds himself – “belong in *normal* life anymore. I couldn’t” – *can’t,* he does not say aloud – “reverse the change. Even when I found out how to quit… I couldn’t just leave Martin here alone. I know now that it wouldn’t have worked for me anyway.”

“It would’ve killed you,” Georgie guesses.

“No such luck,” he says with a short laugh. Instantly, he feels the blood drain from his face. He looks up and fixes Georgie with a panicked, apologetic look. “Sorry, I – that was in poor taste, it’s just – that was what went through my mind when I first realized it.”

“It’s alright.”

Jon clears his throat, still somewhat shamefaced.

“What I mean is that I, ah, tried to blind myself during the Ritual. Turns out I heal too quickly for it to have any effect on my connection with the Beholding. Otherwise I’d have tried it again the moment I woke up in the hospital.”

Georgie says nothing. When he chances a glimpse of her, he sees no judgment or anger, just more of that familiar, gentle sadness. He has to look away again.

“I don’t blame you for walking away back then. You didn’t have the whole picture. Neither did I, but even if I did, I probably wouldn’t have given you all the details, and you knew that. I can’t fault you for not wanting to stay involved when you didn’t know what being involved would actually entail.” He looks up and meets her eyes. “Honestly, Georgie, even if you’d stayed, I probably would have made all the same mistakes. I would have continued putting myself in danger and downplaying it. I would still have gone into the Coffin, but I wouldn’t have told you where I was going beforehand. I would likely have distanced myself from you on my own, because I’d have convinced myself it was in your best interests without asking you how *you* felt about it. I’ve… changed since then, but at the time, I probably would have continued retracing the same patterns. You would have only gotten hurt, even if it wasn’t my intention.”

“Maybe.” Georgie frowns, chin propped on her fist as she considers. “I can’t speak for a version of me that doesn’t exist anymore. But for what it’s worth, I’m sorry you were alone.”

“And I’m sorry I didn’t realize how much I didn’t want to be alone until it was too late.”

“It’s not too late now, though,” she says with a cautious smile.

“No, I suppose not.” Jon’s answering smile fades as he gives her a serious look. “None of this obligates you to stick around, by the way.”

“I know.”

“I’m serious. I’m glad you’re here, but…” *It’s more than I deserve,* he almost says, but stops himself when he imagines Georgie’s reaction to that. “I don't want things to become – toxic, between us. If it gets to be too much, I’ll understand.”

“If it does, it won’t be just because you had a setback. Just – try not to wallow too much when you do, alright? You’re not good company for yourself when you’re like that.”

“Yeah,” Jon concedes on a long exhale.

Georgie sighs as well, a pensive look on her face.

“I think I may have given you the wrong impression before. When I made you promise that you didn’t have a death wish, it wasn’t because I was going to leave if you’re suicidal. It was because I don’t want to be *lied to* about it if you are. I don’t want to be blindsided by your self-destruction, or made complicit in it. It isn’t fair to me.”

“I don’t want that either,” Jon says softly. “And I – I wasn’t lying before, when I promised you that the Coffin wasn’t a death wish. I just… I thought…”

“You thought you could make the decision to live once and be done with it.”

“Sounds foolish when you put it like that, but… yes, I suppose so.”

“Would be nice if it worked like that,” Georgie says with a rueful smile. “I’m not expecting you to get better overnight, and neither should you – especially when you’re still in the thick of it. I’m just expecting you to communicate when things get bad, rather than throwing yourself onto the nearest grenade as – atonement, or punishment, or some misguided belief that you have to earn the right to live. I won’t be a party to that. I can’t. I don’t… hold it against you personally, I get it, I’ve *been* there – but that’s why I can’t be around it. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“To be clear,” she says emphatically, waiting until he meets her eye before continuing, “I don’t mind *hearing* about those thoughts. I take issue with you *acting* on them with no regard for yourself or the people around you, and then minimizing the consequences. And that – that isn’t a value judgment. It’s just… watching you get trapped in that cycle, it takes me to a bad place.” Georgie chews on her lip for a moment, and then nods, as if coming to a conclusion. “If you were looking for a boundary, there it is. I know you can’t avoid danger entirely, but when you’re feeling like this, can you at least promise to talk to someone before making any drastic decisions? You have to let us know if you’re in a bad way, because it *will* affect your judgment.”

Jon lets out a long exhale. “I will.”

“Okay. I can live with that.”

“Thank you,” he murmurs, self-conscious.

“About your voice, though.” Jon gives her a quizzical look. “I thought it was wholly a supernatural thing, but…” Georgie looks up at the ceiling, gathering her thoughts, and then adopts a delicate tone. “Have you considered that it might also be a – a trauma response?”

“I didn’t before.”

“And now?”

“I… I don’t know. It first started partway through the apocalypse. The more I experienced, the more the Archive asserted itself. I was still me, most of the time, but I was also – more, I suppose? It’s… complicated.” Jon rakes his fingers through his hair as he works on his phrasing. “The human mind was never meant to contain that… *much.* The Archive’s purpose is to – well, to archive. Every instance of fear and suffering in that place was a statement. Billions of them, every moment recorded live – and when I read or take a statement, I live it vicariously. My own experience of it is… an essential part of the recording process.” He

blows out a puff of air. “So I had a lot going through my head at any given moment. The human in me couldn’t be conscious of all of it at the same time.”

“That’s… horrible.”

“Yes. And it felt right.” He rubs one arm absently, looking off to the side. “I don’t think I was meant to survive – the human part of me, that is. I was just one mind; I should have gotten lost in the multitude. And I did, sometimes, but… I always found my way back. *Martin* always called me back. If not for him…”

If not for him, Jon would have lost his sense of self in the Archive, given up and accepted the role assigned to him, much like he suspects Gertrude would have. When he lost Martin, Jon almost *did* lose himself as well. He still wonders how close he actually came to losing all semblance of personal identity. To becoming nothing *but* fear: a collection of the ongoing nightmares of billions of strangers, no longer able to distinguish between their terror and his own.

“Either way, I was – above all else, I was still an Archive. I learned to compartmentalize to an extent, but I was never *meant* to have my own voice. At some point, it got lost in all the noise. If I wanted to communicate, I could only use the stories hoarded away in the Archive.”

Jon frowns in consideration, actively weighing the most likely theories as he talks himself through the evidence.

“I… don’t think it was purely a psychological response,” he says slowly, gaining in confidence as he speaks the words. “I think it was a consequence of what I was in that place. The Archive was part of that world’s fabric, so to speak. But this reality operates differently than the one I came from. Its natural laws aren’t dictated by the Beholding. It has… less prominence here. Case in point, I’m significantly less powerful now than I was in my future.”

Georgie raises an eyebrow. “How powerful are we talking?”

“I was an apex predator among monsters. A direct conduit of the Ceaseless Watcher. Oh,” he adds offhandedly, “and I Knew everything.”

“What.”

“Well – *almost* everything. And not all at once. It was more that I – I was *able* to Know almost anything if I looked for the answer.” He allows himself a small grin. “Post-apocalyptic Google, so to speak.”

“Sounds… useful?”

“In some ways. It’s awful to say, but I miss it sometimes. Having control over it, mostly. I could stop myself from Knowing things about a person, give them more privacy. But I also couldn’t opt out of Knowing entirely. I just… had more control over *what* I Knew and when. And there were still things I couldn’t Know. The Beholding will hoard almost any scrap of information, but it has a clear preference for the horrific. It was utterly silent on anything related to an *after* – an afterlife, a reversal of the apocalypse, any sort of escape or release from the nightmare.”

“God,” Georgie murmurs, almost to herself.

“Jury’s out on that one, too.”

“No, I just meant–” Georgie pauses when she sees Jon smirk. “Oh, I see. You’re just being a smartass.” She shoots him a grin and nudges him with her foot. “What about now? Do you still–”

“I don’t have near as much control over it as I used to, no. I can remember the things that I consciously chose to Know then, but… that sea of knowledge, all those potential answers to any hypothetical questions – my access to it is limited now. *And* I’m Knowing things unintentionally again.”

“What about the Archive – the statements?”

“When I first woke up, it felt – the same as it did in the future. A sort of – wall of static that lowered whenever I tried to use my own words. It lifted in the Buried, because I was cut off from the Eye – from the Archive. I thought it would reassert itself when I came back – and it did for a minute – but now it’s…” Jon stares down at his hands, clenched tightly in his lap. “I still have recall of all the statements I already had archived. Not all at once, more like a – like a database, I suppose, but – they’re there if I look for them. The Archive is still *there*, and sometimes it slips through, but… it’s not as dominant as it was before. And seeing as I can speak at all, apparently state of mind *is* more of a factor than I thought. At least right now. Not sure about before.”

“Well,” Georgie says, “even if you have more control over it now, it doesn’t mean you always did. Sometimes circumstances change.”

“Maybe,” Jon says, his thoughts already beginning to stray. Georgie sighs in exasperation.

“Just because there’s a future where things are better doesn’t mean you’re a failure for things being bad in the present. Jon, look at me.” He does, albeit reluctantly. “What you’ve gone through isn’t something that you just *get over*. It’s always going to be there. That doesn’t mean things will never get better. It just means that you need to make peace with the fact that you’ll have ups and downs. If you turn on yourself every time you’re struggling, you’ll never notice the moments of progress. And if you see every instance of progress as an opportunity to berate yourself for not achieving it sooner, then, well – I’m sorry, but things *aren’t* going to get better.”

“I – I know. It’s just…”

“Difficult. I know. I’ve been there.” Her expression softens. “I’m not trying to be harsh. I don’t expect one conversation to change the way you think. It takes years of practice to break that sort of pattern. But when you need reminders – and you will, and I won’t be disappointed when you do – I’m going to keep giving them to you. I’ll ask you to at least *consider* them each time before dismissing them outright. Does that sound fair?”

“More than,” Jon says, giving her a weak smile.

“Good, because I seem to recall you making the same request of me once upon a time.”

Did I? Jon thinks back and draws a blank. Not for the first time, he curses how unreliable his memory can be.

"Still," he says, "I'm sorry to be such a –"

"If you say 'burden' or anything to that effect, I actually will be cross with you."

"Noted," Jon says with an embarrassed chuckle. "But – sincerely, I – I know that right now I'm–" *Dead weight,* he almost says. *Volatile. Tiresome. Untrustworthy. A walking doomsday button.* Georgie gives him a warning look, silently urging him to consider his next words carefully. "Struggling," he opts for. "But I do want to be there for you if you need me, in whatever way I can, so… open invitation to confide in me, or ask for help, or – or anything you need."

"That was eloquent," she replies with a teasing smirk. Jon rolls his eyes.

"Ironically, I think I was more eloquent when I was the Archive."

"Eloquent in a *poetic* sense, maybe," Georgie says with mock thoughtfulness, "but it didn't lend itself to *clarity*."

Another hunger pang rips through Jon's mind and he clenches his jaw, curling his shaking hands into fists.

"Hey." Georgie prods his foot with hers again. "You ready to see Martin?"

"I, ah…" Jon gives a nervous laugh. "I want to see him more than anything, but I'm also – terrified? I know things won't be how I remember them, I know I have to adjust my expectations, but I don't know what to adjust them *to,* and I don't know what to expect from myself, either, and…"

And the hunger is eating away at him from the inside out, an incessant undercurrent of *need-want-feed* running parallel with every other thought vying for his attention. He brings his hands to his face, puts pressure on his eyes, grounds himself in the ache. Almost immediately, his brain latches onto the words *pressure* and *ground* and suddenly he's comparing the cravings to being buried alive, to drowning in noise, to being suffocated by the crush of stories that was – *is* – destined to comprise the entirety of his being. He's being drawn over the threshold of that ubiquitous, baleful door in his mind: hated and feared, yes, but completing him all the same.

Guess that's the thing about being the chosen one, Arthur Nolan's words echo in the Archive's halls. *At the end of it, you're always just the point of someone else's story, everyone clamoring to say what you were, what you meant, and your thoughts on it all don't mean nothing.*

Jon tries to dislodge the statement, but there is no stop button to corral the Archive, and the story continues on: *It seeds us with this… aching, impossible desire to change the world, to bring it to us.*

There are hundreds of thousands of words pounding on the door now, none of them his own, an endless stream of them queuing up in his throat, cramming into his lungs – and with a painful lurch, he's falling down, down, *down*–

Breathe, comes the familiar mantra.

On the one hand, he's glad for how quickly and mindlessly that coping mechanism kicks in by now. On the other hand, he wishes he didn't have so many opportunities to practice that it's become so ingrained in the first place. There *is* something different about it this time, though. Usually, he imagines the command in his own voice, or occasionally Martin's. Just now, he could pick out multiple tones, all overlapping: Martin. Georgie. Basira. Daisy. Himself.

The effect is potent. It allows him to walk himself back from the edge in record time. The hunger still scratches impatiently at the door, but he manages to tear his attention away from it long enough to remember where and when and who he is. When he glances back up, he realizes that only a few seconds have transpired – a storm so brief that apparently even

Georgie didn't register its passing. Instead, she's staring over his shoulder. She catches his eye, raises her eyebrows, and nods, indicating something behind him.

"Well," she says with a smile both amused and reassuring, "I think you're about to find out."

Another stab of panic shoots through him, shattering his momentary calm. Time stands still. When lightheadedness overtakes him and his vision starts to pixelate, he realizes that he's been holding his breath. He lets out a juddering exhale, and turns around.

When he lays eyes on Martin, Jon is speechless all over again.

Martin startles when Jon's eyes lock onto his, still unaccustomed to and unsettled by such direct eye contact. He immediately regrets that reaction when he watches Jon recoil and avert his eyes. The reflexive urge to vanish overtakes Martin then – and he feels himself begin to panic a little more when it yields no results. He had been accessing that power up until moments ago, when he dropped the veil; why is it suddenly out of reach now?

"Hi, Martin," Georgie says, apparently unperturbed by the awkward atmosphere. "I was just keeping Jon company until you got here, but I'll give you two some privacy now." She stands, stretches, and brings one arm down to touch Jon's shoulder. "I'll be here for a while yet. If you need me, I'll probably be in Melanie's usual spot."

Martin can see Jon incline his head slightly. If Jon sees her reassuring smile, he gives no indication. Georgie gives his shoulder another pat and starts to walk towards the ladder. Martin steps aside, giving her a wide berth – force of habit – and watches until the trapdoor closes behind her.

For what feels like an interminable moment, the stale air hangs heavy with silence. Martin stands rigid, mind drawing a blank. *Could cut the tension in here with a bread knife,* he thinks to himself, somewhat hysterically.

Jon, for his part, is staring steadfastly at the ground, utterly unmoving. Martin's heart wrenches painfully in his chest at the sight.

Of all the adjectives that could be used to describe Jonathan Sims, *unmoving* has never been one of them. When he's not running his hands through his hair or scratching at his skin, he's bouncing his legs, tapping his fingers, biting the insides of his cheeks, pacing, rocking in place – an endless rotation of fidgets and stims, flowing one into the next. When he's excited, his eyes light up, intense and intelligent and impossible to break away from; he interrupts himself in his rush to translate his thoughts into speech before he loses them entirely; he's a flurry of animated gestures and borderline manic pacing. Even at rest, his eyes are bright with questions and his hands flutter when he talks; even exhausted and lethargic, his mind is a hummingbird flitting from thought to thought with frantic abandon, eager to catalog every detail and cover every angle.

Sometimes, it's vicariously exhausting to witness; most of the time, Martin is hopelessly endeared. In all the time that Martin has known him, the coma was the first time he ever saw Jon entirely still. Martin used to wish on occasion that he had more chances to just *look* at him. Up until that point, he'd had to make do with furtive glances and stolen moments when Jon was too engrossed in a task to notice Martin staring. In the hospital, Martin finally had a chance to really study him freely.

Stillness doesn't suit him, Martin remembers thinking – and another piece of his heart chipped away.

Unconsciously, Martin finds himself studying Jon again now. He sits hunched forward with his arms folded tightly in front of him, a white-knuckled grip on each elbow, his narrow shoulders pulled in and forward. Judging from the predictably mussed state of his hair, he must have been combing his fingers through it nonstop recently. His lips are chapped and torn from chewing; the dark circles under his eyes seem to have shadows of their own. His multiple layers of clothing do nothing to hide the gauntness of his frame or the frailness of his wrists.

Jon is awake now, yes, but still he looks… distant. Listless. Too close to *lifeless* for comfort; too reminiscent of deathbeds and silent monitors and grey hospital linens. So Martin breaks the silence.

"Jon."

He doesn't raise his head, but his eyes flick upwards to gaze at Martin through his lashes. Sharp eyes, haunted eyes, more and more so with every passing day – and now, they're downright bleak. Still, they're beautiful: a rich brown, dark and deep enough to fall into, and Martin could lose himself in them gladly. Then, Jon breaks eye contact again, curling in on himself even further.

How is it that he manages to look more run down every time I see him? Martin thinks, and then he notices Jon's hands, trembling in his lap now.

"You're shaking."

"Yes." The word cracks on its way out, coming out as little more than a croak. Jon clears his throat before trying again. "Just, ah – just hungry."

"You've been back a few hours now, haven't you eaten yet?" Martin replies automatically, the caretaker in him taking charge. "Jon, you were in there for over a week, you *need* to–"

"Not – not that kind of hunger." Jon finally raises his head, but his eyes still dart away from Martin's every few moments.

"Oh," Martin says quietly. "Statements."

"Yeah." Jon scuffs one foot against the floor.

"W-well, I can wait, if you want to go record one?"

"No, I–" Jon clears his throat again, sitting up straighter in his seat. "I'd prefer to talk. If that's alright with you. I'm sure you have questions for me."

Martin considers. On the one hand, his instinct is to insist that Jon take care of himself first. On the other hand, he knows how stubborn Jon can be. Arguing about it wouldn't change his mind, only waste time and ultimately leave him waiting longer for a meal.

"Yeah," Martin says with a reluctant sigh, "I guess."

"R-right. Well…" One end of Jon's scarf trails in his lap, and he runs his fingertips over it, in the same way that one might pet a cat. "I – I'll answer them as best I can."

"Right," Martin echoes.

"Would you like to sit?"

Martin nods wordlessly and takes a seat opposite Jon, but his mind goes blank again.

"Georgie said she explained things?" Jon tries tentatively.

"Sort of. She said she was working on an incomplete explanation herself."

"Yes, that was – that was my fault. I was having some–"

"Speech difficulties, yeah. She said."

"Which is also why my message to you was so…" Jon sighs. "I would have preferred to use my own words."

"But did you mean it?" Martin blurts out. He feels his face heat in an instant and he has to look away.

“Yes,” Jon says quietly. *Confidently,* Martin notes privately, blushing more deeply. “The sentiment was all mine. I know it may seem – out of the blue, from your perspective, but I – I meant it, all of it.” Jon ducks his head, but doesn’t look away. “I, uh – I still do.”

It’s Martin’s turn to break eye contact, keen to look anywhere other than into Jon’s eyes and the open, sincere warmth living there.

“I’m not the person you remember,” Martin says stiffly.

“Neither am I,” Jon replies, his voice softer than Martin has ever heard it.

Martin’s throat works as he swallows hard. “I’m not the person you fell in love with.”

“I disagree,” Jon says, with more of his earlier assurance.

“I’m *not,*” Martin insists. “I don’t know what the me of the future was like, but I’m not – I’m not *him*. Whatever he did to make you fall for him, it’s – it’s not me.”

“Martin, I fell in love with *this* version of you,” Jon replies, tremulous and beseeching. “With *every* version of you.”

Martin just stares. Jon smiles at him: soft, sad, sorry, sincere.

“I know it must be difficult to believe. I treated you – *horribly,* and for so long. Took you for granted. Never gave you the respect or care you deserved. I… I don’t think I’ll ever stop being sorry for that.” He maintains eye contact, and Martin finds that he cannot look away. “I’ve never been… *good* at this sort of thing – putting words to how I feel. In retrospect, I was falling for you all along. Before the Unknowing. I just – didn’t realize *how much* until I woke up and you weren’t there. There was a – an empty space where you used to be, and I couldn’t… I was almost too late. I almost lost you–”

Martin is startled to see the sheen to Jon's eyes.

“I… I *did* lose you, eventually, and it nearly…” Jon's voice is rough with held back tears. He clears his throat, and when he speaks again, there’s an intensity to his voice that Martin just now realizes he’s missed. “But not – not until much later. Not here. Not now. Not to Peter *fucking* Lukas.”

Martin lets out a surprised, amused huff at the venom with which Jon says the name. Jon looks up, tilting his head slightly – and Martin can feel one corner of his mouth turning up ever so slightly at the familiar mannerism.

“Sorry,” he says. “Just – don’t hear you swear much.”

“Well, he deserves it,” Jon replies, half-scathing, half-embarrassed.

“Can’t say I disagree with you there,” Martin says with a tired chuckle.

“About – about Peter.” Once again, the name sounds poisonous on Jon’s tongue. “He’s lying to you–”

A bolt of annoyance shoots through Martin at that. “I’m not an idiot, Jon.”

“No,” Jon says hurriedly, his hands fluttering in agitation, “I didn’t mean to imply–” He breathes a heavy sigh, flustered. “I know that I – I underestimated you for far too long. But you’re clever, and capable, and you *understand* people in a way that I find endlessly impressive.” To his chagrin, Martin can feel himself redden at the unexpected praise. “You’re not gullible enough to trust Peter for a moment. I know that. And” – Jon grins at him with such open affection that Martin wants to flee – “last time, you outmaneuvered him so seamlessly that I – after seeing the look on Peter’s face, I – I'd already fallen in love with you, but if it was possible to fall just a little more, I think would have right then.”

Martin's face is on fire now, *must* be.

"I trusted you then, wholeheartedly, and I still do," Jon continues. "I… I'll respect whatever decision you make going forward. Even if it means you continue working with Peter. But," he adds, licking his lips nervously, "I have information now that we didn't have the first time around, and I – I'd like you to know the whole story. It could have implications for whatever strategy you decide on."

"You're talking about the Extinction."

"Among other things, yes."

"Is it a real thing?"

Jon lets out a long exhale, looking off to the side with a pensive scowl. Martin can feel himself smile at the sight of that oh-so-familiar crease between his eyebrows, a telltale harbinger of a Jonathan Sims dissertation. Resting his chin in his hands and leaning forward, Martin settles in for an earful.

"Yes," Jon says after a moment's hesitation, "but – it's more complicated than Peter assumes. It's real insofar as it's a pervasive terror for large swathes of the human population. Justifiably so, I think it's fair to say. And it's possible that, given existential threats like global climate change, nuclear weaponry proliferation, pandemics, war, artificial scarcity, structural oppression and inequality embedded in society worldwide…"

He counts off on his fingers, the line between his eyebrows deepening as he builds momentum.

"And of course we have a twenty-four-hour news cycle inundating us all with that reality, and – entire genres of literature and film utilizing those apocalyptic themes… well, suffice it to say, the fear of a world without us might eventually reach a point where it could be considered on par with Smirke's Fourteen.

“But Smirke’s taxonomy is also an oversimplification. The human experience is far too varied and complex to be split into neat categories. The *animal* experience, rather. It’s likely that the Fears have existed since before the advent of modern *Homo sapiens,* and if we consider the origins of the Flesh – it would be anthropocentric to suggest that only the human mind is subject to them, and” – Jon shakes his head – “I'm veering off topic. Point is, the Fears bleed into one another. It’s why a Ritual for a single power was never going to work, why Jonah’s Ritual was predicated on bringing through all Fourteen at once. Or, case in point, perhaps Fifteen. The Extinction *did* have a domain of its own after the change, it was just… less sprawling than the others, and there were fewer instances of it. And no Avatars dedicated to it, as far as I could tell.”

Jon taps two fingers against his lips, leg bouncing restlessly as he ponders his next words.

“As for an Emergence, though… I really don’t think there is such a thing as a grand birthing event. The Extinction is already *here,* in a way. Many of the statements feature more than one Fear at a time, precisely because the boundaries between them are so indistinct. Some of the statements that Adelard Dekker collected – I do think that they contain genuine examples of the Extinction as a coherent Fear of its own, just… mixed in with other Fears. I imagine the Extinction’s trajectory might be similar to that of the Flesh – arising as times change, as more and more minds collectively experience that flavor of fear.

“It might be a quick evolution – similar to how anthropogenic climate change has followed an exponential growth curve, aptly enough – but I don’t think that the Extinction is or – or *will be* somehow more formidable than the other Fourteen.” Jon's speech turns rapid-fire as he bounces from one thought to the next. “It can’t exist independently of the other Fourteen any more than the others can, so a Ritual on its behalf would collapse under its own weight. If there *is* a grand extinction event – well, *when,* I suppose; nothing lasts forever, the End claims everything eventually, time continues its slow crawl towards the inevitable heat death of the universe, *et cetera*–”

Jon is counting off on his fingers again. Martin shakes his head fondly.

“But it won't occur because of an Extinction Ritual,” Jon goes on. “There *was* an apocalypse where I came from, and it had nothing to do with the Extinction. Just… a very human flavor of monstrosity: the pursuit of power and personal gain, even at the cost of unimaginable suffering for everyone else.” He gives a humorless laugh. “Fittingly enough, though, it all started from a place of fear – of mortality, of subjugation, of the unknown.” His expression falls, voice dropping to a near whisper. “And – and my own fear led me to the eye of that

storm, so to speak. All of it can be traced back to that foundational fear of the unknown, can't it? The roots just… branch outward from there."

Jon's trembling hands twitch abruptly, as if snapping something in two. He doesn't appear to notice the gesture, too lost in his own thoughts. Before Martin can voice his concern at the shift in demeanor, Jon shakes his head and forges onward. He reverts to his previous hyperfocused, almost academic manner, but an undercurrent of anxious energy lingers.

"Anyway, I actually suspect that, much like the End, the Extinction wouldn't benefit from a Ritual even if one *could* work. It thrives on the *potentiality* of a mass extinction event, not the fulfillment of one. The Fears will cease to exist when there are no longer minds to fear them. Of course, it doesn't *have* to be humans, or any creature currently living. If something *does* come after us, the Fears will likely survive and adapt, but otherwise–"

Jon finally makes eye contact with Martin for the first time in minutes and stops short.

"Oh," he says. "I've been… rambling, haven't I."

"I don't mind," Martin replies, unable to fight back a smile.

"W-well, anyway…" Jon rubs the back of his neck, looking thoroughly embarrassed. "I don't believe that the Extinction is the world-ending threat that Peter claims, so if you were planning on continuing to work with him because of that…" He shrugs. "Also, his plan for you was never about the Extinction. Not really. He was – *is* – genuinely worried about the Extinction, but his plan to stop it is to have the Forsaken destroy the world first. But it hasn't been long since his last Ritual failed; he knows it will be some time before he can try again. His *immediate* plan is all about one-upping Elias, taking control of the Panopticon, and accruing power, to increase the chances of success for his next Ritual attempt."

Jon exhales another humorless laugh, and his voice takes on an odd, breathless quality as he continues.

"Not all that different from Jonah Magnus, really. His allegiance to the Eye began when he realized that his peers would continue attempting their own Rituals. His solution was to

destroy the world before they could. So afraid of his own mortality that he was willing to subjugate the entire human population for his own benefit." Jon folds his arms again, tucking them against his middle and leaning forward, as if trying to make himself smaller. When he speaks again, there's a noticeable waver in his voice. "Somewhere along the line, he went beyond justifying his actions – jumped right to taking pleasure in them."

Jon's sharp eyes go unfocused. The rise and fall of his chest quickens.

"I'm sorry," Martin says gently. He doesn't know what else he can say.

"For what?" Jon asks, coming back to himself after an overlong pause.

"Georgie told me what he did to you. I mean, she didn't go into detail, but she mentioned that he possessed you and used you to–"

"It wasn't possession," Jon interrupts, a desperate edge to his tone. "Not in the conventional horror movie sense. It was the same compulsion that takes me when I start reading any statement, just – more intense. I couldn't – c-couldn't control my body, but he wasn't *actually* in my head, it just – *felt* like it, like he'd crawled into my skin along with his words. Then again, I–" Jon laughs, gripping one wrist with his other hand, fingernails digging grooves into scarred skin. "I suppose I *was* possessed in a way, in the sense that he considers the Archivist his possession. Haven't belonged to myself since the moment he chose me, still don't–"

Jon's gaze goes distant yet again, and Martin watches with burgeoning worry as his pupils dilate and constrict with the fluctuation of his voice.

"...he posited a future where – humanity was violently and utterly supplanted–"

"–marked me as a part of that, without my understanding. Or consent–"

"Jon?" Martin says apprehensively.

"–keep me in the dark just so I wouldn't stop being useful – made me complicit in a thousand different nightmares, and lives ruined for the sick joy of some otherworldly voyeur–"

"–any future I might have had, sacrificed to his–"

"Jon, what's–?"

There's a singsong tenor to his voice and an intensity to his eyes now, reminiscent of the look he gets when he records–

Oh, Martin realizes. *Statements.*

"–I swear I could still feel those – eyes follow me – a grin of victory playing upon his lips–"

"Jon," Martin says again, more insistently, reaching out on impulse to place a hand on Jon's knee.

Cognizance flares to life in Jon's eyes and his hands fly up to cover his mouth. He seems to struggle with himself for a minute, stolen words muffled beneath the hands pressed tight to his lips. He makes a noise that sounds almost like choking, or sobbing; he looks at Martin with wide, watery eyes, then takes a deep breath in. A quiet whimper chases the air out on his exhale, and Martin's own breath catches in his throat. He's seen Jon scared, but he's *never* heard him make a sound quite like that – not while bleeding out from a fresh stab wound, not with a gash in his neck, not fumbling to apply ointment to a burned and peeling hand, not even with worms burrowing through his flesh and a corkscrew tearing through the tunnels they left behind.

"You're okay," Martin says, willing it to be true.

"I don't – I don't want to talk about him anymore," Jon says abruptly, then winces apologetically. "Sorry, that was – I didn't mean to sound cross, I just–" He flaps his hands, lips moving wordlessly.

“It’s okay, I understand.”

Jon nods, but his breaths are still coming fast and shallow. One hand seeks out Martin’s, still resting on his knee; he grips it tight, fingers slotting between Martin’s like they belong there. The direct skin-to-skin contact sends pins and needles radiating up Martin’s arm, but he fights the impulse to draw back.

“We can talk about something else,” Martin says, forcing calm into his voice.

Jon inclines his head again, gulping down air. Even as his breathing begins to even out, the shivers coursing through him only grow more violent, the tremor in his hands becoming more and more pronounced.

“You need to eat something,” Martin says.

“N-no, I–”

“Yes, you do–”

“No!” The exclamation cracks like a whip and ricochets off the walls, echoing down the tunnel. Jon’s face crumples and he shrinks in on himself again. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to shout, I–”

“It’s fine–”

“It’s *not*.”

“We can argue about it when you’re not *literally* starving. I’ll go fetch a statement–”

“It won’t help.”

“What do you mean?”

Jon brings his free hand to his mouth and bites down on his knuckles.

“Jon?” Martin says again, more sternly. “What did you mean?”

“I’m – not just the Archivist, Martin, I’m the *Archive*. All of the statements stored upstairs, I already *have* them, every single one of them catalogued in my head, and – re-experiencing them takes the edge off while I’m reading, but as soon as the recording stops, the hunger comes back even stronger, and I want…” Jon gives him a pained look. “Did Georgie tell you about…?”

“She mentioned something about you putting yourself under house arrest because you’re afraid of hurting people.”

“It’s necessary,” Jon says, almost defensively.

“What will happen if you don’t take in new statements?” Jon says nothing, and Martin sighs. “Jon.”

“I don’t know.”

“Will you starve?”

“I don’t know.”

“Please don’t lie to me.”

"I don't know," Jon says, pulling his hand away from Martin's and rubbing his eyes furiously. "It *feels* like starving, but I don't know if it will actually kill me. But I don't want to hurt people just to keep myself from hurting. I don't want to be like –" He cuts himself off with a sharp intake of breath. "I've caused untold suffering as it is. I don't want to hurt anyone else."

"There was a woman giving a statement upstairs earlier–"

"I'm not taking her statement." Jon's reply is automatic, almost like a practiced line. It sounds as if he's trying to convince himself more than Martin.

"I wasn't suggesting–"

"Her name is Tricia Mallory," Jon interjects. "It's her birthday next week; she'll be twenty-eight. She has two cats, and a parakeet, and a girlfriend named Shona, who has an engagement ring hidden in the bottom left drawer of her desk–"

"Why are you–"

"Because I'm so far removed from humanity at this point that I need to actively, continuously persuade myself *not* to see other people as cuts of meat." Martin would have preferred snappish to the resigned, matter-of-fact, *tired* tone in which Jon gives that confession. "Her name is Tricia Mallory," he recites again, in that same rehearsed manner. "She lost her voice in a minotaur's labyrinth. She's finding it again, slowly, but it will never be the same. Her nightmares are horrific enough without adding another monster to the mix. I'm not taking her statement."

"What about just reading her written statement?" Martin asks. Jon blinks, slow and catlike, and Martin can see the uncanny glint of hunger in his eyes. "Have you already heard her story?"

"No," Jon says after a sluggish pause. "I don't think her statement ever made it down to the Archives the last time. And the knowledge of its content didn't consciously come to me after

the change. There were – so many other statements in progress by then. So much to See."

"So it would be something new for you." Jon is silent, staring off into the middle distance, unblinking, glassy eyes riveted on something only he can see. "Would that be enough to hold you over for now? It – it won't be live and in person, but at least it won't be… I don't know, stale?"

"I…" Jon's pupils dilate. Constrict. Dilate.

"She's probably left by now," Martin continues insistently. "I can go track down the statement and bring it back here." Jon looks as if he's warring with himself. "Please, Jon. It's just a reading. You won't hurt anyone."

Blood wells up on Jon's lip where he's been biting it. Eventually, he gives a tiny nod, his shoulders going limp in defeat. Jon needs to eat, but Martin wishes it didn't feel so much like pressuring someone to break sobriety.

"Okay," Martin says, fighting back the surge of guilt, "I'll be back as soon as I can. Please don't go anywhere, alright?"

"Alright," Jon replies in a nearly inaudible whisper.

Martin tosses a glance over his shoulder as he leaves. Jon is eerily still again but for the persistent shaking. He looks small, and haunted, and lost; fragile, precarious, with a posture that brings to mind something broken and taped back together in slapdash fashion.

First things first, Martin tells himself, and tries to focus on the task at hand.

Once the trapdoor closes behind Martin, Jon buries his face in his hands.

That wasn't how he wanted this conversation to go. Just judging from his demeanor, Martin has shaken off the Lonely more than Jon had expected, but *still*, Jon should be the one comforting *him.* It took the Martin of the future ages to acclimate to the idea that he deserved to be cared for, too; to unlearn the reflex to reverse any attempt Jon made to take care of *him* for once. Right now, Martin needs to be shown that care, and yet Jon can't manage to redirect his one-track mind away from his hunger for more than five minutes at a time. Selfish, selfish, *selfish* –

The slow creak of a door cuts through the silence, and Jon's blood runs cold when Helen's playful lilt rings out behind him.

"Archivist," she says with unrestrained glee. "Long time no see."

Jon had been dreading the Distortion's inevitable reappearance. He should have known that she would make her entrance when he's at his most vulnerable. *Like a shark to blood,* he thinks to himself, swallowing around the lump in his throat.

"Brooding, are we?"

"Hi, Helen," he manages, struggling to stay impassive.

It doesn't matter; he jumps anyway, when several long fingers – *too many angles; too many joints* – curl around his shoulder. As if her touch was an unpaid toll, she removes her hand once he provides payment in the form of that momentary burst of alarm. Her headache-inducing laugh is made all the worse by the acoustics of the tunnel.

"Now, then" – Jon doesn't look around at her, but he can practically *hear* her lips curl in a grin – "pleasantries aside, I believe we're due for a chat."

Chapter End Notes

- Citations for Jon's Archive-speak: MAG 010; 134/111; 154/144; 098. And Arthur Nolan's statement is from MAG 145.

- I'm hoping Jon's ramble wasn't Too Much lmao,,, it is admittedly part self-indulgence (read: shameless projection) on my part, but also: ADHD is just Like That sometimes. I'm still navigating how to strike a balance between having something like that flow well and be, well, *readable* from an audience perspective, while also trying to capture the reality of how an ADHD ramble often does lack coherence from an external POV, because so much of the associative reasoning never gets verbalized (Thought Train Goes Brrr from Point A to Point Q and Does Not Show Its Work). All this is to say: I know that whole section is meta-heavy NOW THAT'S WHAT I CALL TANGENTS. I don't know if I achieved what I was aiming for, but it was fun practice. Hopefully the end result wasn't too disjointed or too much of a slog. (I actually edited a lot out, believe it or not, lol.)

- Also, in Jon's defense, he Really Needs A Snickers. And he hasn't been able to SPEAK FOR HIMSELF for weeks. He deserves a little infodumping, as a treat.

- Thanks for sticking with me through the slower update schedule. We're back to full shifts at work now, so chapters are taking me longer to write. And apparently I've just decided all the chapters are gonna be 10k+ words now, whoops.

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

Feed

Chapter Summary

In which Helen shows up to cause problems; some uncomfortable truths are confronted.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings for Chapter 16: self-harm as a stim/to distract from intrusive thoughts (scratching, wrist banging/bruising, intentionally biting tongue/lips hard enough to draw blood); blood/injury as a result of self-harm; panic/anxiety symptoms; statement-typical horror imagery; description of past nonconsensual statement taking (verbatim from an episode of the show); internalized victim blaming; starvation/restrictive behaviors re: consuming statements (and associated internalized ableism re: addiction parallels); an instance of accidental compulsion; swears; brief passive suicidal ideation.

Probably goes without saying based on the CWs, but a good portion of this chapter is heavy angst, more than I originally intended (but with some hurt/comfort at the end). I had to do a bit of a U-turn to correct an instance of canon noncompliance from last chapter. More about that in the end notes. c:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Helen prowls into Jon's line of sight and sits directly across from him in one fluid motion. She looks him up and down, mischief – borderline malice – coming off her in waves.

“You look like something the cat dragged in,” she says cheerfully. “Chewed up, spit out, left on the doorstep of a capricious god. The Beholding certainly has sunk its claws into you, hasn’t it?”

“More or less,” Jon says with a shrug. The tremor in his hands is unrelenting, but he does manage to keep his voice from shaking.

“Feeling a bit peaky?”

“Did you want something?” A hint of irritation slips through this time, and Jon kicks himself for rising to the taunt.

“Do you *ever* play well with others?” Helen grins. “I’m simply… sating my curiosity. You of all people should be able to understand *that*.” Jon gives a noncommittal grunt and scuffs one foot against the ground, refusing to meet her eye. “You’ve all been coming down here rather frequently.”

“Have you been spying?”

“This *is* a temple dedicated to shameless voyeurism, is it not?” Helen’s smirk widens further. “I… *overhear* things from time to time, yes, but I don’t have *quite* the same propensity for eavesdropping that your lot do. Just enough to inspire some questions, as it were.”

“Joy,” Jon says sardonically.

Unperturbed by his inhospitality, Helen leans back in her seat and crosses her legs – twice over, her right leg curling all the way around the left, as if boneless. *Of course,* Jon thinks with wry amusement. *All her bones are in her hands.*

“Time is… difficult, Archivist,” Helen says ponderously.

“‘It Is Lies,’ telling a truth.”

“I’ve never *lied* to you, Jonathan.” Helen sulks in mock offense.

“Sure.”

“Reality – *truth* – is malleable. It twists and bends” – her right leg wraps once more around the other, plastic and prehensile – “winds and wends, and–”

“…returns to what it was, though what you see and feel may leave their mark upon it,” Jon quotes.

“Still speaking in stolen words, I see.”

“On occasion.”

“Time is similar,” Helen continues, disregarding the interruption. “A jumble of strings and noise, blurred edges and faulty perceptions.”

“Mm-hmm.” Jon makes a show of examining his cuticles. It’s petty of him, deliberately acting so uninterested, but he really doesn’t care. In fact, it’s almost gratifying.

“Am I *boring* you, Jonathan?”

“Yes.”

“My, you *are* cranky when you’re starving.”

Jon rolls his eyes. “Can you get to the point?”

“You are an out-of-place artifact.” Jon purses his lips and says nothing; Helen gives him a knowing smile. “All tangled up in a web of minutes and machinations.”

“Poetic of you to say so.”

“Can’t you take a compliment gracefully? I’m simply pointing out how compelling your patterns are. Recursion suits you.” She hums thoughtfully. “In fact, if you ever tire of the Eye, the Twisting Deceit might just welcome you with open doors.”

“I really am begging you to make your point.”

“Fine.” Helen leans forward, chin resting in her spindly hands. *“You* are a temporal anomaly. There must be a story there.”

“There is.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll tell me?”

“I don’t suppose I will.”

“I thought you would be difficult.” Helen sighs. Leans back. Twists her legs, adding several more loops to the coil. “Why don’t I tell you *my* theory, and you tell me if I’m hot or cold?”

“No.”

“You took a wrong turn and wandered down a path that wasn’t to your liking,” Helen overrules, “and – much like a capricious god yourself – you felt entitled to meddle with the course of history, heedless of the consequences. How am I doing so far?” Jon remains silent. Helen flashes a triumphant grin. “Fascinating. You don’t strike me as the type. Self-centered enough to rework a world to suit your preferences, certainly, but not bold enough to actually *take* that leap.”

“Well, never let it be said I’m not *fascinating,*” Jon says drily.

“How did you do it?”

“With considerable trepidation.”

Helen heaves a sigh that almost sounds genuinely aggravated. “I don’t understand why you’re being so *cagey.*”

“To inconvenience you specifically.”

“Oh, put your claws away, Jonathan. I don’t plan on running off to tattle to Elias. The game is no fun when all the answers are presented on a silver platter. In fact, I believe Elias would agree with that sentiment.”

“When he’s the one doing the tormenting.” Jon scoffs. “Doubt he’ll enjoy being on the receiving end.”

“Well, no. That’s what makes it *fun*.”

An amused snort escapes Jon. Helen looks positively delighted at that response.

“Well, in case toying with Elias isn’t incentive enough,” Jon says, “you should know – it’s in *your* best interests that his plans don’t come to fruition as well.”

“Is it now?”

“It is.”

“Care to tell me what his plan *is?”*

“No.” Helen’s lower lip juts out in a feigned pout. “Just know that you had your fun in the beginning, but it didn’t last. If he wins, everyone loses. Even the monsters.”

“That is certainly food for thought,” she replies, tapping one elongated finger against her lips. The corners of her mouth hike up sharply in an impossibly wide grin, showing off numerous – *too* numerous – pristine teeth. *“Speaking* of food…”

Jon glares at her.

“How long are you planning on pursuing this pointless hunger strike?” Helen asks, transparently goading. “We both know you won’t be able to hold off forever.”

“I can,” Jon says, far more feebly than he would have preferred. He clears his throat. “I *will.*”

“Why?” Helen tilts her head at a neck-breaking angle. “Guilt?”

“It – it isn’t right.”

“Everything eats.” She shrugs. “Actually, your victims are fortunate. They always survive their encounters with you, don’t they?”

“Not unscathed they don’t. And *surviving* isn’t the same as – as *living,* having a quality of life. It’s wrong to condemn them to – a lifetime of nightmares for my own gratification.”

“They would have nightmares anyway.”

“Their *own* nightmares, not – dreamscapes turned into a playground for the Eye. And this way, they actually have a chance to heal from the trauma, not… be forced to relive it every moment.”

"You seem to weather it just fine."

"Does this look like *fine* to you?" Jon snaps, flinging his arms outward to indicate his entire person: haggard, ashen, quaking.

"Hmm. Perhaps not. You *are* shaking like a leaf in a windstorm. I wonder: how long can you hang on before you're carried away?" She twirls a writhing lock of hair around her finger. "You know, Helen used to be like you. Then she realized that shame wouldn't change what she was. So she chose to embrace it."

Jon's expression falls as a familiar guilt rises up in him.

"I owe you an apology," he says quietly.

"What?" Helen sits up ramrod straight, apparently caught off guard.

"You came to me for help once. Well, twice, I suppose. The first time, Helen Richardson was spirited away right in front of me. Then she became you – or, you became her."

"Self is difficult," Helen murmurs.

That it is.

"Then, when you took your first victim, you felt conflicted. Guilty."

"Helen was like you once," Helen repeats.

“You needed someone to talk to.”

“Helen liked you,” she replies with a sudden defensive edge. “She felt better after talking to you.”

Another stab of shame goes through Jon and he ducks his head, mumbling: “Only because she didn’t realize at the time what I’d done to her.”

“What, the nightmares?” Helen barks out an incredulous laugh. “Compared to the waking nightmare of my corridors, the dreams were a *reprieve*, Archivist. At least there was someone there to witness. To commiserate. To listen, and *understand*.”

“Which is why you sought me out again, isn’t it? You needed someone to listen. I turned you away.” Jon glances up briefly to see Helen twisting her fingers around one another, an uneasy edge to her. “You saw me as a kindred spirit. That… frightened me, more than words can say. It would have required me to confront what I was becoming, and I couldn’t – I wasn’t ready.”

“Helen wasn’t ready. To be me.”

“No. Neither of us were ready for our becoming.” Jon repeatedly digs a thumbnail into the back of his hand, leaving semicircle dents in the scarred skin there. “We were never going to be ready. We weren’t… *meant* to be – this. But our feelings never mattered.”

“Choice is difficult.”

Choice. Time. Self. Truth. A lot of things are difficult, apparently.

“In any case, I – I’m sorry. I… know what it’s like, to reach out for help only to find that everyone already sees you as too far gone. To be – conflicted, and afraid, and guilty, and have no one to turn to.” Jon looks up to see her watching him inscrutably, and he forces himself not to break eye contact. “I wonder sometimes, whether things may have been different for you had I not rebuffed you back then.”

“It’s better this way.”

“Are you sure?”

“What’s the point of wallowing in guilt?” Helen says tartly. “You feed it, or it feeds on you until there’s nothing left – and then you feed anyway.”

“Still, I’m sorry you were alone.”

“We are what we are, Archivist,” Helen says with a dismissive wave. Coming from her, the gesture has the same effect as an optical illusion, a blur of conflicting angles and nonsensical perspectives. Jon finds himself squinting against the eyestrain. “It’s pointless denying it.” Helen’s sly grin returns as she recovers from her fleeting discomfort. “Case in point, you *are* planning on feeding.”

Jon’s stomach drops at the accusation.

“I – I’m *not*,” he protests weakly.

“Come now, Jon – is *reading* a statement really any different from taking one live? Trauma is trauma; a statement is a statement. The only difference is that in one case, you don’t have to make eye contact as you partake.”

“No, it’s–” He flaps his hands, a torrent of distress dropping over him in slow motion. “I’m–”

“Prolonging the inevitable, and pretending otherwise to soothe your own guilt. A new entry for your catalogue… once you read it, you’ll still have to look your victim in the eye when you sleep, won’t you?”

“How do you–”

“I guessed.” Helen lets out a delighted cackle. “Correctly, it would seem.”

“It… it’s not the *same*–”

“What makes it so different, hmm? Is it that your victim came here to give their statement voluntarily? That you didn’t *personally* wring the words from their lips? Does that really make the trauma less acute, the nightmares less harrowing?” Helen pins him in place with a victorious, malevolent leer. “Will it *taste* any different?”

“Stop it–”

“Or is it simply that your victim won’t recognize you? Won’t immediately identify their tormentor as Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of The Magnus Institute? Won’t make the connection between this flimsy, cringing persona you cling to and *all those eyes?”*

“Shut *up*.” It comes out as nearly a whimper as Jon hunches forward, hugging his middle. Even through a thick jumper and two shirts, he can feel his fingers pressing bruises into the valleys between his ribs.

“Does concealing the human behind the monster *really* have any impact on their fear? On your shame? On your *appetite?* Or does it just make it easier to escape detection, to dodge responsibility – to distance yourself from what they see when they look at you?”

“I…”

“Whether it’s *morally wrong* won’t stop you. Neither will guilt. The only thing restraining you right now is *fear* – of rejection, of how the others will react if they see what you *really* are. And when that fear is eclipsed by your fear of what the Eye will do to you if you deny it… well, it’s remarkable the choices we make when the alternatives are terrible enough, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” he says in a pained whisper.

Because Helen is right, of course. It’s disingenuous to pretend that consuming Tricia Mallory’s statement won’t drop him directly into her nightmares. He *knows* that, and he agreed to Martin’s suggestion anyway, shoved the truth of the matter into the dusty recesses of his mind so he didn’t have to confront the reality of it. Despite all of his promises and professed resolve, he was about to give in – *again* – knowing full well that it’s *wrong.* He’s fooling himself if he thinks he can ignore the cognitive dissonance now that it’s spelled out for him so clearly.

But isn’t he also fooling himself if he thinks he can ignore the compulsion? What if Helen’s right, and the hunger will eat away at him until there’s nothing left, no humanity remaining to hold him back from a hunting spree? Wouldn’t that make him even *more* dangerous? What if–

Stop it, he rails at himself. *Stop rationalizing, stop looking for excuses, stop pretending this is anything less than obsession and want and selfish need, stop telling yourself that you’re any different from–*

“I’m not trying to dissuade you,” Helen continues wheedling. “On the contrary: once someone comes to feed the Eye a statement, it will never stop watching them. You may as well soak up some of that fear for yourself. It’ll go to waste, otherwise.”

“That’s not how it works.”

“Isn’t it, though?” Helen beams triumphantly.

“No. As long as I – as long as I don’t introduce her words to the Archive, it can’t get to her. The Eye can Watch her all it wants, but – not through me. I just need to – avoid reading any new statements.” He threads both hands through his hair, pulling hard. “Christ, I almost–”

Jon is struck with a wave of nausea.

“Enjoy your snack, Jon,” Helen says airily. “Whenever you decide to stop dragging your feet.”

“I’m not – I *won’t*–”

You will. You know you will.

Jon covers his face with his shaking hands again, rocking slightly in his seat to distract himself.

No. You don’t do that anymore. Just – tell Martin the truth when he comes back. Tell the others. If you can’t control yourself, they can–

“You really do make things unnecessarily difficult for yourself.”

“I don’t *care*. I changed my mind.”

As if on cue, the Archive calls up a statement.

I don’t want that anymore, Francis says. *It’s different now; I’m different now. I’ve worked so hard.*

Pause for Helen’s laughter.

They don’t want to want it, but…

I don’t care, the Spider replies.

Tell me more, the Archivist croons, even as its vessel balks.

Pause for Helen's laughter.

Francis only has a desire, an itch in their bones…

I want what you want, the Spider says, *deep, deep down in the hidden bit of you you've tried so hard to kill.*

Pause for Helen's laughter.

"Shut *up*," Jon snarls, but it's a toothless thing, weighed down with fatigue and shame.

They resist. They sit oh-so-very still and keep their hands held tight to their chest.

No, they say. *Not this time. I won't.*

Helen laughs, and laughs, and laughs, the reverb pounding in Jon's head like the clang of metal on metal.

"I'm not taking any more statements." As far as protests go, it comes out sounding far too weak and empty to be even remotely persuasive. "I – I'll find another way."

"Keep telling yourself that. With enough repetition, maybe you'll even start to believe it." Jon flinches as if backhanded. With a satisfied sigh, Helen unwinds her legs and stretches, rising from her seat. "Have a lie-down, won't you? You look like you need it."

When he hears her chair scrape against the floor, Jon looks up to see Helen walking towards her door, a spring in her step.

"Helen," he calls hoarsely. "Wait."

“Hmm?” She contorts and turns at the waist, claylike.

“Remember what I said – about Elias’ plans.”

“Oh, don’t fret. I have no love for Elias. He isn’t *nearly* as fun as you are. And I am enjoying simply… watching things unfold. I’m certain you can appreciate that.”

“See you around,” Jon sighs, too weary to take the bait. “I suppose.”

“You will.” The doorknob yields a metallic squeak as she turns it. “Speaking with you always leaves me feeling… better. Refreshed.”

“Of course it does. Emotional turmoil is like a late night snack for you.”

“And a delicious one, at that. You know what *that’s* like.” Helen gives a merry wave as she steps over her threshold. “Sweet dreams, Archivist.”

The door shuts behind her.

Jon wishes he had the energy to scream.

The Archivist only has eyes for the statement clutched in Martin’s outstretched hand. Perched on the edge of his seat like a bird of prey, Jon’s gaze locks onto it, pupils blown wide. He does not blink. He does not breathe. He does not move.

He simply *stares*, leaning precariously forward as if magnetized.

“Here,” Martin says uncertainly, extending his reach.

Jon stretches out an unsteady hand. Breathes in. Breathes out.

Just being in the statement’s presence, a summary of the story flows into his mind:

Tricia Mallory clocked out at the same time as she has every workday for the last two years, five months, and three days since she started working at the shop. She was planning on stopping for groceries before heading home and was texting her girlfriend to ask if she had anything to add to the list. When the door closed behind her and she finally looked up from her phone, instead of finding herself in the same familiar alley as always, she was Elsewhere.

She began to walk. At first, she made no progress: the alley would lengthen before her eyes, matching her pace. She walked in place as if on a treadmill, and then she began to jog, and then her mounting panic bowled her over and she began to run full-tilt towards an unknown destination that never drew any closer. When the first sharp turn materialized in the towering wall to her right, she took it without a second thought before it could disappear. After that, the maze changed with every step she took: walls popping into existence behind her the moment she looked away, gaps opening in the walls to either side within the millisecond of a blink.

She spent so long hopelessly lost, confounded by the impossible geometry of the place, that when she first caught sight of the thing following her, she was relieved. But when she called out, it never responded to her queries: it simply followed her, matching each of her steps with one of its own. It picked up pace whenever she did, but it never charged, never lunged, never closed the distance between them. It was content to follow and loom, a persistence predator that never tired or lost sight of its prey.

For weeks, it stalked her through those nonsensical, labyrinthine alleyways, even as she begged it to end the chase, to put her out of her misery. It let her scream her throat raw. It knew that no one would hear her. She was alone, but for the monster and its infinite patience.

Eventually, she decided to reverse the pursuit. Whenever she tried to approach the thing, it would retreat to just outside her reach. She can still pinpoint the exact moment she realized that the chase would never end, that she would never reach her quarry, that she would never come close enough to touch something real ever again.

When she was found in the alley the next morning, she had injured her vocal cords so badly that it's taken weeks to regain her voice. The same amount of time she spent lost in the maze. The same amount of time that it was impossible for her to have been missing, according to the calendar and the clock and her girlfriend and the cast of specialists and mental health consultants she's seen since.

And her voice is no longer her own, but everyone else insists that it sounds the same as it always has.

It's a skeleton of a story, a list of plot points without feeling or substance to contextualize them. It's not *enough*. The Archivist needs the full account, needs *her words,* needs to walk those alleys alongside her, needs the lived experience of her fear as she relives each moment, *needs*–

When Jon's fingertips brush against the statement, the gentle rustle of the paper snaps him out of his reverie. He recoils bodily, pushing his chair back several inches. It's only with some difficulty he manages to shut his eyes, breaking his line of sight.

"Jon?" Tentatively, Jon opens one eye a sliver to see Martin watching him intently, concern writ large all over his face. "What's wrong?"

"I… I can't," Jon gasps out.

"What do you mean you can't?" Jon clenches his teeth so tightly his jaw aches. Martin sighs and places the statement on the floor next to his chair. For a moment, his face scrunches up in a clear show of frustration, before relaxing as he tries to salvage his patience. "Jon, we went over this. You need to eat something, and this won't–"

"I lied, Martin," Jon whispers, his cheeks burning with shame.

"What?"

“By omission.”

“O…kay?” Martin waits for more, but Jon just chews furiously on his bottom lip. His eyes are fixed on the statement again. “You want to elaborate?”

“It’s a statement I don’t have yet.”

“Yeah? That’s… sort of the point.”

“When an Archivist takes in a new statement, it becomes part of the Archive. *That* statement” – Jon gives an indicative nod – “hasn’t been entered into the Archive yet. If I read, or – or hear it, it will be.”

“Again, that’s… that’s the point, isn’t it?” Martin asks with mounting uncertainty. “Feeding the Archive?”

“You’ve recorded statements before. You know what it’s like.”

“I know, it’s – horrible, and I’m sorry you have to do it, but–”

“When you’re reading, it feels like you’re *there,* right?”

“I guess? Sort of?”

“W-well, when *I* take in a statement, it doesn’t just *feel* like I’m there. I *am* there. I See the story play out through the victim’s eyes. Told in person, recorded on tape, typed out on a screen, written in ink – doesn’t matter. It’s all the same.” He pauses, swallowing hard around the lump in his throat. “And when it’s a *new* statement, a *fresh* statement, unread and

unarchived, it forms a – a link between the victim and myself. They'll be drawn into that memory every time they dream, and the Eye will oversee it all. Through *me*."

Jon shuts his eyes once again to block out his view of the statement, so easily within reach. As if in protest, the Archive shoves a different one before his eyes. Without warning, the syllables pile up in his throat, crowd together behind his teeth, cling fast to his tongue, and he's falling down, down, down and away.

"He says he wants my story," he recites mechanically, crisp and clear like the tinny notes of a musical box, each word a pin on the cylinder. *"He says he needs to hear what happened to me, and I – I want to tell him to – to go away – but I – I sit down. And I start to tell him – everything – and as I do, it's like I'm there again – and I just can't stop talking – I wanted to – to scream, but instead I just sat and calmly told him my life story, and he just watched me. His eyes – drinking in every fragment of my misery – and then it was over, and he looked at me like he'd just eaten, like, a perfectly cooked steak. You know what he said, he said, 'Thank you.' Thank you, just like that, like – like reliving the worst parts of my whole life were just a bit of a favor that I'd done him. That wasn't the end – nightmares, where – he's there the whole time, just… watching me. And he's all eyes. He's* all *eyes."*

As the final words pass through his lips, the invisible wires moving Jon's jaw are severed and the cloying residue of the statement dissolves in a heady rush of static. He blinks several times as he comes out of the trance. When his vision comes back into focus, the details resolve into Martin, pale and tense and stammering. Jon's heart plummets into his stomach at the sight.

"Wh-what was–"

"I'm – Martin, I'm – I'm so – so sorry," Jon stammers, mortified. "I – didn't mean to – to *vent,* it just – slipped out, and–"

"Jon, what *was* that?"

"A, uh, a statement." Jon folds his arms tightly and looks down at his lap, digging his nails into the skin around his elbows. "From last time. One of my victims, Jess Tyrell, she – came here, gave you her – her statement. About me. About what I did to her."

“Oh,” Martin says softly. His tone is unreadable, and Jon can’t bear to look at his face to glean his reaction.

“And I almost – I almost did it again.” Jon's recalcitrant eyes drift back to Tricia Mallory’s statement, its siren song monopolizing his thoughts. “If I read that statement, it will be the same as if I looked her in the eye and drew the story out of her in person. She’ll never be able to put it behind her.”

“Jon…”

“I – should have told you when you first suggested it, I – I don’t know why I didn’t. Or – no, that’s – that’s another lie. I… I didn’t tell you because I didn’t *want* to be stopped.” Jon hangs his head, letting his hair fall to cover his face. “Christ, I was going to… if it wasn’t for Helen, I *would* have–”

“Wait.” Jon can hear the frown in Martin’s voice. “Helen?”

“She paid me a visit as soon as you left. Impeccable timing, as always.”

“What did she say to you?” Martin says sharply.

“Nothing that wasn’t true.”

“Jon, she’s the *Distortion,* telling lies is what she *does*–”

“And I’m the Archivist, and curating trauma is what I do.” A chill runs through Jon, eliciting a prolonged shiver. He waits for it to pass before continuing. “I can’t – I can’t trust myself to do the right thing when I’m like this. I can’t hear myself *think* over the hunger – it clouds my judgment, and – all it takes is one moment of weakness, and I could…” Jon takes a deep breath and finally looks up to meet Martin’s eyes. “I can’t be trusted, Martin.”

“Do you know for *sure* that reading a statement is the same as taking one live? How do you know Helen isn’t just–”

“Because I have prior experience with it. Most of the statements here – they didn’t have that effect, either because they’d already been introduced to the Archive or because the statement giver was already dead by the time I recorded it. It was – rare, to find one that hadn’t already been picked over or – or rendered inactive.” Jon licks his lips nervously. “But there were a couple. Helen didn’t need to remind me. I already knew, I just… compartmentalized the information so I didn’t have to think about it.”

“What if… what if I read it first? Silently, to myself? Then it wouldn’t be *unread,* technically, and then you can–”

“I can’t risk it.”

“B-but…” Martin sputters for a few seconds. “There has to be a – a middle ground somewhere, a loophole–”

“There isn’t.”

“But how do you *know–”*

“Because I’m a monster, Martin!”

Jon’s voice frays and snaps halfway through his sentence. The ragged declaration echoes up and down the tunnel as if in agreement.

“Jon…” Martin looks at him with such gentle sincerity that Jon wants to scream. “You’re not… you’re not a monster.”

“I *am* – I *have* been, I could be again, and I – I don’t want to go back.” Jon’s fingernails cut deeper furrows into his arms. “I can’t, but I need, I *need*–”

…a statement, a story, a terror, a dream…

Jon raises one arm and then brings it down, slamming his wrist into the edge of his chair. The bright burst of pain disperses the looping thought with a jolt. Martin rises abruptly from his seat and takes a step towards him.

“Jon, stop it–!”

“What I need,” Jon rants, breathing heavily, his pulse thundering in his ears, “what I *need* is to be watched – by something other than the Beholding and the Distortion and *Jonah* and–”

“Jon, please–”

“I need to be seen by someone who actually wants me to stay – *me.*” Jon puts his head in his hands and rocks back and forth, grasping desperately at some outlet for the panicked energy raining down on him. “I need someone who believes that’s possible, because I – I don’t know that I do, and that makes me even *more* dangerous. I – I need people to keep me honest, because obviously I can’t trust *myself,* and–”

“Jon!”

Jon finally looks up, moisture clinging to his eyelashes. He’s on the verge of hyperventilation, his mind too full of *hunger-want-need* to spare a thought for breathing. Martin is standing there, watching him with wide, scared eyes, wringing his hands in obvious distress.

“We can figure it out, okay? We – we’ll find some way. We won’t let you starve.”

“It may not kill me.”

“But maybe it will!” Martin’s voice pitches up half an octave in his frustration. “And even if it doesn’t kill you, you’re still *suffering,* and that’s – that’s not okay.”

Jon has heard those words before, in that exact tone.

What the hell do I do with that? I mean, Christ, Jon, that’s – that’s not okay!

No, it’s not.

It’s not him, is it. Not – not really. It’s – what, addiction, instinct, maybe mind control, something like that? I can’t believe he’d choose to do something like that.

Someone is laughing. It takes Jon a moment to realize that it’s him.

If he’s already gone, then all of this is just…

The laughter fractures into sobbing.

“Jon?”

“I’m sorry, Martin, I’m so – so sorry, you–”

You deserve better than this.

"I hope you will forgive me for a great many things, as it may be I do worse. I have that feeling, that instinct that squirms through your belly. There will be great violence done here. And I bleed into that violence–"

Jon bites his tongue. Tastes blood. Feels it heal. *Gnaws* at his tongue, his lips, the insides of his cheeks: feels it heal, breaks the skin, feels it heal, chases the hurt, *feels it heal–*

"It's actually a weight lifted, the knowledge that you don't have to do it anymore, but you're still there, aren't you? It's not like you've left the slaughterhouse–"

Martin is coming closer now.

Not safe not safe not safe not safe don't come near–

"You cannot stop slaughter by closing the door."

Martin reaches out.

No no no no no no please stop stop stop please–

"Stop."

The command rends its way out of Jon's throat and fills his head with a cacophony of white noise. Martin stops short. Looks down at his feet, then up at Jon with an expression of confusion that morphs into alarm as he tries and fails to take another step.

"Jon?" Martin asks in a quavering whisper. "I can't…"

He cannot move, because Jon made it so – wrapped his voice around the reins of reality and molded it to suit his own whims. He tries to explain, to apologize, but the Archive shoulders him aside once more, eyes locked on Martin's.

"We create the world in a lot of ways. I suppose it shouldn't be surprising that, when we're not being careful, we can change it–"

Jon bites down on his lower lip so hard, he's certain he would need stitches were he still human. As if to emphasize that he's not, the laceration begins to knit itself back together. Jon nearly screams in frustration. Martin's mouth is moving. There's no sound at all, save for the blood pounding in Jon's ears. It doesn't matter; he can guess well enough at what is being said: Martin looks terrified.

*He's afraid. Of **you**. You did this. Your voice, your words, your **nature**–*

And once again, Jon is falling down, down, *down*, drowning and buried and trapped under a destiny he cannot escape, and he isn't breathing, and he isn't blinking, and Martin is afraid and the Archivist can *taste* it on the air, soaking it in with greedy, glassy eyes, and he is *whole–*

The world goes dark.

As Jon lists to the side, Martin lunges forward, but his legs remain planted in place. It isn't until Jon actually hits the floor that whatever force was immobilizing him lets up.

"Jon," he says urgently, going to his knees next to him. "What's happening? What's wrong?"

There's blood on Jon's lips, in his mouth, and Martin can't determine its source. Where before Jon had been vacillating wildly between heavy panting and shallow hyperventilation, there is no rise and fall to his chest now. Martin places a hand in front of his lips and under his nose, waiting for any sign of an exhale. Nothing. Panicked, Martin presses two fingers to

the pulse point on his throat. Still nothing. The only sign of life is the rapid, almost violent flurry of movement beneath Jon's closed eyelids.

It brings Martin right back to sitting at his bedside in the hospital, helpless and waiting for any scant sign of a change in his condition. As days turned to weeks turned to months, keeping Jon company turned into begging him to wake up turned into resigned, hopeless, *pointless* routine.

Martin remembers vividly the day he said goodbye for what was supposed to be the last time. The Lonely had been waiting patiently for so long. When he finally let it in, it was like deliverance. Like coming home.

"Jon, please," Martin says quietly, his lower lip wobbling. *"Please* wake up."

Nothing.

"O-okay, don't – don't panic, don't – he's not d-dead, he's just…"

Lifeless. Again.

Martin lets out a panicked groan and digs his phone out of his pocket. He scrolls to Basira's name in his contacts, but as his thumb hovers over the call icon, he realizes with sinking dread that he has no service down here. *Obviously,* he thinks, cursing his foolishness.

"What do I…"

As Martin takes stock of his limited array of options, one hand migrates to Jon's, stroking gently over the burned and scarred skin there. Martin could go upstairs, find Georgie or Basira, but that would mean leaving Jon here alone. And would they really know what to do anyway?

“Better than I would,” Martin says, his vision going cloudy. “They’ve actually *been* here for him–”

The first tears escape and trickle down his cheeks, hot and bitter. Entirely unproductive; it’s not like crying and pleading ever woke Jon up before. *Why are you always so useless?* Martin thinks, patting one dampened cheek with his free hand. *Focus up, Blackwood. Panicking won’t help.*

Jon needs a statement. Obviously.

For a brief, shameful instant, Martin’s hand twitches towards the statement laying on the floor only a few feet away. He shakes his head in chastisement. Jon would never forgive himself. Even if he wasn’t the one who actually read it.

Martin wracks his brain for alternatives. There *has* to be another way–

And there is, he realizes suddenly.

“I – I – I don’t know how you’ll feel about this, Jon,” Martin says with a nervous laugh. “I wish I could just – ask your permission, but… I’m sorry.”

Martin clears his throat and straightens his posture. Then, with a curt nod, he offers up his story.

“Statement of Martin Blackwood, regarding the assault on the Archives by Jared Hopworth and the, uh, other… Flesh… things.”

Martin closes his eyes. Opens them. Takes a deep breath.

“Statement begins.”

Jon's eyelids flutter open to a blur of muddled colors and soft edges. Every sluggish beat of his heart is accompanied by a pulse of vertigo. There's a presence to his left and a hand combing through his hair. He leans into it, chasing something solid and real to anchor him amidst the jumbled sensory input. Slowly, his hazy vision starts to clear and the vague shape resolves into a person, kneeling next to him on the floor.

"Martin?" Jon rasps out, groggy with disorientation.

Martin's distraught expression melts into relief as their eyes meet.

"Welcome back," he says with a watery smile.

"What happened?"

"God, Jon, you – you weren't – you weren't *breathing*, and–" Martin's sharp intake of breath turns into a hiccup. "I – I thought–"

Details are coming into focus now. Martin is close enough for Jon to count the freckles on his face. To see the tear tracks shining on his cheeks.

"You just – passed out, and you weren't responding, and I didn't know what to do – I didn't want to leave you here alone, and there's no cell service down here so I couldn't call for help, and…" Fresh tears are welling up in Martin's eyes. "You weren't *breathing*," he repeats.

"I'm sorry."

"It's – it's fine."

“It’s not,” Jon says, aggrieved. “You shouldn’t have to deal with me like this, you *just* came out of the Lonely–”

“Yeah, I did,” Martin retorts. “It’s not there to catch me anymore, which means *you* have to be.” Shocked at his own daring, his cheeks go pink – but only an instant later, the color pales. His voice drops to a near-whisper, but there’s defiance in the set of his jaw. “You can’t do that if you go and die on me again.”

Martin is going fuzzy at the edges again. Jon squints, attempting to bring the world back into focus. It takes a few seconds before he realizes that Martin is the only thing in his field of vision that looks indistinct. Almost as if he’s–

Fading.

Jon sits bolt upright. A mistake, he realizes almost immediately, as another spell of dizziness plows into him.

“Please don’t go,” he says blearily, the words tumbling out and running together in a haphazard tangle. “Don’t–”

“Whoa, hey,” Martin says, placing a steadying hand on Jon’s shoulder. He looks solid again, Jon realizes with a burst of relief. “You need to take it easy, okay?”

“You were – I could – I could see through you,” Jon chokes out. He places one hand over Martin’s; fastens onto it barnacle-like when he realizes it’s ice-cold. “It can’t have you, I won’t *let* it–”

“What?”

“The Lonely.”

“But… I wasn’t trying to…” Martin wears a puzzled frown, staring at their joined hands as if an answer can be found there. Then he blanches, his bafflement phasing into fear. “I didn’t call it that time, it just – moved in on its own, I didn’t even notice it was *happening*, I–”

“What were you thinking about?”

“What?”

“This is important,” Jon says intently. “Where did you go? What did you see?”

“I… you.” Martin’s gaze returns to his hand, clasped in Jon’s. “I saw you, and you were gone. Again.”

“I wasn’t breathing.” *Like the coma,* Jon thinks, awash with sudden understanding.

“Yeah. It just – took me back, I guess.” Martin worries his bottom lip as his eyes turn misty again.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Jon says, slipping easily into a practiced soft, soothing tone. “It’s okay. You’re okay.”

Martin closes his eyes, nodding. After a minute, his sniffling turns into a quiet chuckle that breaks halfway through.

“We’re – both kind of a mess, aren’t we?”

“Understandably, I think,” Jon replies. He tries for a reassuring smile, but he’s fairly certain it comes off as pitiful instead. Or maybe just exhausted.

“Are you… feeling any better?”

Jon blinks slowly. He feels like he’s been beaten around the head with a brick. His mouth is dry, his joints are stiff and aching, and there’s still a metallic tang of blood on his tongue, but… he’s not shaking. It’s like circulation flowing back into a cramped and sleeping limb, a simultaneous rush of stinging pain and crisp relief.

“Yes,” he says. He can *think* clearly for the first time since he exited the Buried, his mind no longer crowded and clouded with need. The instant he notices that absence – the hunger silent and sated and subdued behind its door – abject dread crashes down on him. “Wait, why – *why* am I better, why–”

Martin takes a deep breath, looking apprehensive. “I… gave you a statement.”

Jon’s stomach gives a terror-stricken lurch. He pulls his hand back, rededicates it to rubbing and scratching furiously at his opposite arm. Scanning the area with darting eyes, he confirms what he already knew: there’s nowhere to retreat, to hide, to curl up and be contained. He’s making a concerted effort to claw off his skin now; he only notices when Martin places a hand on his to stop him.

“Not – not that one,” Martin clarifies, gesturing back towards the statement left forgotten on the floor. “One of mine.”

“Yours…?”

“Y-yeah.” Martin gives a nervous laugh. “I was – I was so worried that it was one you’d already heard in the future, or – or that you wouldn’t hear me, that it wouldn’t *work*, but–”

“It was about the Flesh,” Jon murmurs. He never had taken a statement on its siege on the Archives before now. As the details of the story begin to trickle into his conscious awareness, he wrinkles his nose and grimaces. “Oh, I see. Flesh spiders. Lovely.”

"Flesh spiders?"

"Oh, that's, ah – what we took to calling them during the apocalypse. The ones that look sort of like – severed hands, but boneless, and with too many fingers? They were… a relatively common fixture in the Flesh domains. And the way they move…" Jon blows out a slow breath and shrugs, awkward. "Well. Flesh spiders."

"Oh. Yeah, I… I can see it, I guess." Martin breathes another nervous laugh. "You, uh – you heard me, then?"

"The Archive did," Jon sighs. "It's always listening. Always watching."

"I'm sorry," Martin says, his chin quivering as he averts his eyes.

Jon blinks rapidly several times, then tilts his head to the side. "For what?"

"I – I basically *force-fed* you, Jon. I wanted to ask first, but you weren't responding, and I – I thought you were…" His shoulders slump. "I couldn't… I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for. If anything, I should be apologizing to *you*, for…" Jon opens his mouth. Struggles for words. Closes it. "Well, you shouldn't have to give away a piece of yourself like that for my sake. It's not your fault I'm like this."

"It's not yours, either."

"Isn't it?" Jon smiles sadly.

"It's *not.*"

Jon bites back a tired retort. There's no point in retreading the same trampled ground. Apparently, silence isn't the response Martin wanted.

"I'm serious, Jon," he says, adamant. "None of this is your fault."

"Maybe not all of it." It's the closest thing to a compromise he can manage at the moment. Martin looks ready to argue; Jon heads him off. "You haven't heard the full story yet."

Because apparently I can't finish a single conversation without having a goddamn breakdown.

"Whatever you have to say, I doubt it'll change my opinion."

The absolute certainty with which Martin speaks only makes Jon feel worse.

"Why do you always give me the benefit of the doubt?" he whispers, staring down at his hands.

"Because you're not a bad person."

I'm not exactly a person *anymore,* Jon thinks, shutting his eyes. He knows better than to say it aloud.

"Martin?"

"Yeah?"

“What I was saying before. About the Extinction, before all of–” He makes a vague, circular motion with one hand. “The dramatics.” Martin opens his mouth, likely to object to the phrasing, but Jon continues before he can get a word in. “What I was trying to get across is that you – you don’t need to sacrifice yourself on its account.”

“I gathered as much.”

“And…” He looks up and meets Martin’s eyes. “I would also prefer if you don’t sacrifice yourself on *my* account.”

The world could stand to lose an Archivist, Jon thinks. Martin, on the other hand – the world is actually *better* for him being in it. Warmer, kinder, richer.

“I know you think working with Peter will keep me safe,” Jon says, “but it won’t, because – because it won’t keep *you* safe, and I need… more than anything, I need you to be okay.”

“But did it work last time?” Martin’s posture goes tense, his eyes narrowing, shrewd and exacting. It’s a sussing-out-lies, brooking-no-argument, calling-out-bullshit expression – one that Jon is all too familiar with. “Did working with Peter keep him distracted, away from you?”

“For a time, yes,” Jon says hesitantly. “Then you bested him, cost him his bet with Elias, and he cast you into the Lonely. Following you in drew his attention to me. Admittedly, I wasn’t exactly *subtle* about it.”

“Suppose that tracks.” Martin snorts. “Never really could protect you from yourself.”

“I couldn’t leave you there.” Jon says the words without a hint of levity or compromise, meeting Martin’s gaze with equal determination.

“You’d survive without me,” Martin replies flatly, a measure of hard-won warmth sapping away.

“I wouldn’t want to. I had to, once, and I almost didn’t…” Jon blinks against the stubborn, stinging pressure welling up in his eyes. “I can’t do it again.”

Martin looks away, mouth set in a firm line.

“Look, I’m not… *expecting* anything,” Jon says. “I realize this is – a lot to take in all at once. And I accept that my coming back may have altered the course of things. I just… don’t want to live in a world with a you-shaped void in it. I need you to be okay, even if it’s far away from me.”

“I don’t… *want* to be far away,” Martin says slowly, appearing to grapple with the admission.

“You should know, when I followed you into the Lonely last time…” Jon pauses, picking through word after word looking for a way to capture the truth of the matter. “I didn’t do it because I felt guilty or obligated. I didn’t do it expecting anything, or to alleviate my own loneliness. I did it because I love you.” Another searching pause. Jon silently adds *words* to Helen’s list of things that are difficult. “I couldn’t just – let you fade away, thinking that no one cared, that you didn’t *matter,* that you wouldn’t be – remembered, and missed, and mourned. I couldn’t let you vanish believing that you weren’t loved.”

When Jon chances a glimpse at Martin, he looks stricken. Wide eyes swimming with conflict and denial; lips pressed tightly together; hands curled into fists on his knees.

“I’ve never *once* questioned that decision, and I’d do it again. I… I wanted to be the one taking care of *you* for once. I still do. I’m–” Jon huffs. “I’m making a poor show of it right now, I know, but I need you to know, you – you don’t have anything to prove. You don’t need to carve away pieces of yourself in exchange for scraps of affection. Care shouldn’t be… transactional. You don’t have to always be the one giving. And whatever you’re thinking right now, I need you to know – you’re not a burden; you’re not too much of one thing, or – or not enough of another. It’s okay to just… be as you are. I promise.”

Martin is looking studiously away now, breathing through his nose in short, sharp breaths.

“Can you look at me?” Jon asks softly. He waits until Martin meets his eyes. “The Lonely is *lying* to you when it tells you that it’s the only place where you belong. If you believe nothing else, please believe that you don’t have to be alone. You deserve *better* than to be alone. You always have. You always will. Unconditionally.”

For an impossibly still, drawn out moment, the declaration hangs between them, an outstretched hand waiting for an answering grasp. And then…

Well, Jon probably should have predicted tears. He should have also predicted his own panic in response to said tears – which, mingled with exhaustion and burnt-out fear and *relief,* dissolves into tears of his own.

“God, I hope – was that too much?” Jon says, laughing nervously and scrubbing at his eyes.

“Yes,” Martin hisses through a choked noise that Jon doesn’t even know how to begin to categorize.

“I’m sorry, I – I don’t have the same way with words that you do, s-so–”

“No, it’s not – it’s not *you,* it’s just – *everything* is too much, and I can’t–” Martin’s lip trembles as he tries to force air into his lungs. A fresh cascade of tears pours forth and he too begins rubbing furiously at his eyes with his sleeve. “I don’t know what’s *wrong* with me–”

“I’m sorry,” they both say at the same time – and then they’re both laughing.

“You apologize too much,” Martin says thickly.

“So do you.”

Martin’s fingertips brush against Jon’s wrist. Unthinkingly, Jon turns his hand palm-up and intertwines their fingers. He flinches away when Martin gasps, an apology already on his

lips, but Martin chases his hand and grips it tightly.

“Is this… okay?” The question is accompanied by a preemptive cringe.

“Of course it is,” Jon says softly. “More than okay. It’s just – I thought I upset you?” Martin had seemed alright with it earlier, but… “I should have asked first. Last time, it took… quite some time before you were consistently able to tolerate physical contact again.”

Martin experimentally flexes his fingers in Jon’s hand.

“It’s… strange,” he says slowly. “Like having anesthetic wear off. If the thing that was numbed was a phantom limb.” At the clumsy metaphor, Martin scrunches up his nose – *adorably,* Jon notes privately. “Or – or something.” He frowns when he glances back to Jon. “What?”

“What?”

“You’re… smiling.”

Jon brings his free hand to his mouth; touches his fingertips to the affectionate curve to his lips.

“Sorry, it’s just… I’ve missed you.” He breathes a sigh that starts out contented before catching in his throat and shaking apart into nearly a sob.

“Jon?”

“Sorry, sorry.” Jon draws in a deep breath to collect himself. “It – probably seems silly from your perspective, hasn’t even been a year, but it was… it was much longer for me.”

“How long are we talking?” Martin asks, an apprehensive wrinkle forming between his eyebrows.

“I, ah…” Jon puffs out his cheeks, exhales slowly through his nose. “I sort of – stopped keeping track of time at some point? But, uh – long enough to realize that I wasn’t aging, so, um… a – a long time.”

And long enough for large swathes of humanity to begin dying off. Long enough for the feast to become a famine. Long enough for the Corpse Routes to begin to wither. Long enough to accept that there was nothing left to salvage.

“Oh,” Martin says, nearly inaudible. Jon wishes he wasn’t so familiar with that sad, gentle look in his eyes. Then Martin’s chin dips to his chest, subtle movements in his jaw indicating that he’s clenching his teeth.

“Martin?”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there when you woke up,” he says, shoulders hunched miserably.

“Not your fault.”

“It – it sort of is, though.”

“No,” Jon says firmly. “It isn’t.”

Martin looks unconvinced, but he doesn’t press.

“Do you, uh… do you still not age?”

“Don’t know,” Jon murmurs. The concern has crossed his mind more than once. He isn’t sure if the Beholding would deign to answer that question if he tried to Know. He’s been too afraid to find out. “I hope that’s changed, though. I’d – much prefer to grow old with you.”

A strangled noise escapes Martin’s throat. Jon is bewildered for the brief few seconds it takes to replay what he just said.

“Jon, I – I – I – you – you can’t just *say* something like that without warning, I–” Martin’s gaze darts around the room, looking anywhere but at Jon. He’s red up to his ears.

“Sorry,” Jon says with an apologetic cringe. His free hand starts flapping uselessly of its own accord. Almost immediately, the other pulls away from Martin’s to join in the stim. “I… I guess I forgot that we’re – we’re at different points in our relationship.”

“Our relationship,” Martin echoes.

“Uh, I mean, I–” Jon can feel himself flushing now. Distress climbing, his hands redouble their agitated flailing. “Sorry, that – that was, ah, presumptuous of me, and I – like I said, I don’t have any expectations – our timelines have diverged in a lot of ways and I’m not entirely sure what that means for–”

“Jon, slow down–”

“Sorry,” he says again, twisting both hands in his scarf to quiet their flurrying. “I’ve – made things awkward.”

“It’s – fine, I just – I’m still trying to process everything. I thought you weren’t going to wake up, and – and then you went into that Coffin and you were *gone* for over a *week* and I thought you weren’t coming back–”

“I – I should apologize for that as well. I didn’t expect it to take so long, truly. Last time it only took three days. If anything, I thought I could find my way out *sooner* this time, now I

actually knew what I was doing, didn't have to fuss about with my rib–"

"Your… rib?"

"Yes, uh – last time I tried using my rib as an anchor."

"You… what?"

"I – needed an anchor," Jon says hurriedly, intent on moving through the points quickly in hopes that Martin won't stop to react to each one, "and I thought I could use a part of my body, so I tried to cut off a finger–"

"What?"

"–but it kept healing before I could saw through the bone, so I asked Helen to take me into her corridors so I could find the Boneturner–"

"What?"

"–and I made a deal with him, his freedom for a rib – well, two ribs, one for me and another for him in exchange for a statement and–"

"You've got to be *kidding* me–"

"–I left the rib behind when I went into the Coffin, thinking it would, I don't know, tether me to the surface, give me something to find my way back to–"

"Jon," Martin groans, rubbing his forehead with his free hand in a confused mixture of horror, frustration, and longsuffering non-surprise – yet another look with which Jon is *far*

too familiar.

“–but it didn’t exactly *work,* because I didn’t have any attachment to it–”

“It was *part of your body* and you didn’t have any *attachment* to it?” Martin yelps, punctuating the question with a shrill, disbelieving bark of a laugh.

“Yes, yes,” Jon says with a flippant wave, “I’m *well* aware there are some things to unpack there. Point is, it didn’t work, so I was – stuck, for a bit. Then I felt a *pull,* and it guided me back, and when we opened the Coffin, there were tape recorders piled around it, dozens of them.”

“Which is why you left the tape recorders.”

“Yeah. Got the idea from you. First time around, you’re the one who–” Jon stops short. “Oh, fuck me.”

“What?”

“I’m an idiot.”

“Why?” Martin tenses with growing alarm. “What is it?”

“It – it was never the *tapes,*” Jon says, shaking his head and laughing. “It was the act of you *leaving* them there.”

“What?” Martin asks yet again, his worried expression giving way to pure confusion.

“After all this time, I thought I finally had a decent grasp on anchors.”

Jon had assumed that the flaw with his first foray into the Buried lay not with his general *strategy,* but with the anchor he chose. The rib didn't work because it wasn't *actually* an anchor. He had no connection to it, didn't care about it – wanted nothing to do with it, in fact, as a reminder of his encounter with Jared. Jon's body hadn't felt like it actually belonged to him for a long time by that point. He should have known it wouldn't work as an anchor.

And he knew that the tapes weren't true anchors, at least not in and of themselves. They were stand-ins, so to speak, for the real thing. Reminders. Tokens. The ones he'd placed closest to the Coffin were the ones with familiar voices on them: Martin, Georgie, Basira, Melanie, Naomi. The rest, he left running on the off chance that statements in general would act as an anchor for the Archivist in him. At the very least, having them there as a backup wouldn't hurt – or so he thought. It was obvious that doing so would preclude the possibility of Martin coming up with the idea on his own like he did originally, but that fact never struck Jon as relevant.

"I thought I could pull *myself* out as long as I had a – a genuine anchor to reach out to, but…"

Between waking up in the hospital and following Martin into the Lonely the first time around, Jon had done nothing *but* reach out for help. It was never enough. H needed someone to actually reach back. He should *know* by now how adept his mind is at telling him he isn't wanted. Hasn't he always struggled with subtle cues and insinuations? Hasn't he always needed direct communication and explicit reminders and observable demonstrations? Even when he actively avoided those affirmations and connections – there's danger in vulnerability, after all – he'd still always craved them, hadn't he? Regardless of what he thinks he does and doesn't deserve, he still *wants* and *needs.*

For all he Knows and has Known, he's remarkably ignorant of his own psyche sometimes. How is it that it always takes a crisis before he achieves these epiphanies, especially when they seem so *obvious* in retrospect? Of *course* it wasn't enough for him to reach out. Of *course* he needed someone to see him – to look him in the eye, so to speak, and take his hand in spite of what lives there. To know for certain that, yes, here and now, just as before, Martin still sees something worth saving.

Jon ruffles his own hair, breathing out another incredulous chuckle.

“Let me guess – you did something to reach back. To call me home.”

“I… I just – talked. Asked you to come back. Or demanded, or begged – threatened, a few times. Depended on my mood, really. I was – sort of all over the place.” Martin snorts. “Felt properly daft, too, sitting on the floor talking to a box of dirt.”

“I imagine so.”

“In my defense, it was Georgie’s idea.”

“I’m willing to bet it was also her idea to have Basira use that radio to call to Daisy.” Jon shakes his head again. “And I think it’s safe to assume that the first time I did this, you were talking to the Coffin as you left those tape recorders. Or, if not, maybe just the act of putting them there spoke for itself. Either way, you were reaching out, telling me you wanted me to come home. *That’s* what mattered.”

“Wait,” Martin says, jaw going slack, “you mean to tell me that you leaving those tape recorders for *yourself*–”

“May have ironically ensured that it would take even longer for me to get out this time, yes.”

For a long minute, they each look into the other's eyes with matching blank stares. The silence breaks when one of them – Jon isn’t sure who starts it – begins to snicker. Soon, they’re both doubled over in a new storm of laughter and tears.

“I’m – I’m sorry,” Martin manages. “I shouldn’t *laugh,* it’s just–”

“Morbidly, inappropriately funny, yes.” Jon looks at Martin with an exhausted grin as he tries to catch his breath. “And cathartic, and long overdue, and an entirely justified response to the – absurdist horrorshow our lives have become.”

“I’d say I’m laughing so I don’t cry, but, well…” Martin points at his puffy eyes.

“Also long overdue, I think.”

Jon can feel his eyelids start to droop heavily as exhaustion creeps back up on him, but for the first time in a long while, it isn’t accompanied by resignation and dread. His attention is too preoccupied with the sight of their joined hands, the accompanying warmth crowding out the fear.

For this moment at least, he feels – in a word – *safe*.

Chapter End Notes

Martin: what do you MEAN you gave away an extra rib for a statement
Jon: LISTEN,,,, babey needed a sNACC

btw idk if this will be as funny to anyone outside the US (idk if it's a recognizable reference anywhere else), but when I was writing that entire bit, I definitely wrote Martin saying, “You went to *Jared*?” at first and, well… [jewelry commercial voice] He Went To Jared.

Also: S4 Lonely!Martin still thinks he’s in a slowburn, S5 soft!Jon doesn’t have the patience for WAITING and just Says Shit without thinking, roll for damage.

_____

- SO, I got this chapter out sooner than I expected?? Work was slow this week.

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

- Citations for Jon’s Archive-speak are as follows: MAG 101; 142; 032; 030; 030 (again); 069.
The Francis and the Spider excerpts are from MAG 172. Martin’s past dialogue regarding Jess Tyrell’s statement is from MAG 142.

- re: the U-turn. I was originally planning on (temporarily) resolving Jon’s current statement situation by having him read that fresh statement. But Starshower mentioned in a comment (here) that there’s actually canon support for the idea that any fresh statement will result in the shared nightmares, even if it’s not taken directly. Dekker and Salesa both mentioned in statements to Gertrude that they anticipated nightmares after

telling their stories. I initially handwaved it with “eh, maybe the difference is that they’re specifically addressing Gertrude”. BUT Starshower pointed out there’s a line in MAG 123 that heavily suggests otherwise:

> *It looks like this statement came in just after Gertrude disappeared…. And whoever took it didn’t do any follow-up, just… filed it away. I may be the first person to actually read it, so… sorry, Angie. I suppose.*

Admittedly, this could be Jon simply apologizing to Angie for the fact that no one bothered looking into her statement. I might be tempted to go with that interpretation, if not for those aforementioned comments by Dekker and Salesa. With all of those points combined, I think Starshower is right and the most likely theory is that reading a new statement *does* have the same effect as taking one live.

TL;DR – had to write myself out of a canon noncompliance corner I almost trapped myself in. I’m trying to stay *mostly* canon compliant up until S5. I think I’m back on track now though. Also, it gave me some more things for Helen to needle Jon about. Whoops. (Personal apologies to Jon. I gave him a rougher time in this chapter than originally intended. Hopefully I made up for it with some fluff at the end there.) Addressing the statement hunger also means this chapter is sparse on comfort specifically for Martin, but I don't plan on leaving him in his S1-S4 perma-caretaker role.

Anyway, shoutout and thanks again to Starshower for picking up on the slip! c:

- Which!! Speaking of, I should probably say: I’m always open to having these things pointed out to me. Or even just people sharing their own meta interpretations regardless of whether they differ from my own, because I love talking meta. (I’m also just waiting for canon to demolish some of my personal pet theories in S5. I’m sure it’ll happen.)

- idk why I treat endnotes as an excuse to prattle lmao. thank you for reading! as always, your comments all give me life.

Intervention

Chapter Summary

In which compromises are made.

Chapter Notes

Also (and most importantly): Jon gets a NAP.

CWs for Chapter 17: panic/anxiety symptoms; brief mention of past self-harm (from last chapter); mention of past (canonical) blood/injury; brief allusion to past passive suicidal ideation; brief claustrophobia/Buried themes (in the context of a nightmare); some blink-and-you'll-miss-it internalized ableism re: ADHD (not explicitly stated as such); Jon-typical self-loathing, internalized victim blaming/dehumanization, etc.; discussion of low self-worth, fear of abandonment/rejection, and other Lonely themes; extensive discussion of Jon's statement consumption (so, general warning for restrictive behaviors re: 'eating' and self-hate re: addiction/compulsions); swears.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Even asleep, Jon is a flurry of movement. The muscles in his jaw tense repeatedly as he grinds his teeth; his limbs twitch and jerk and tremble; his fingers curl into his palms, fists clenching and relaxing at random intervals. The quick, erratic motions beneath his closed eyelids are accompanied by gasps and the occasional whimper. Impossibly, he looks even frailer than usual – folded in on himself and shivering despite the thick, oversized jumper engulfing his slight frame.

Martin sits on the floor with his side pressed up against the cot, his arm resting on top of it and his eyes riveted on the few inches of space between Jon and himself. Part of him wants to reach out, to soothe away the varying shades of distress flitting their way across Jon’s face; another part of him, quieter but nonetheless insistent on making its existence known, tugs him in the opposite direction, urging him to widen that handspan of distance between them into a chasm. Something about Jon’s ragged breathing keeps Martin rooted in place, his heart skipping a beat any time the pauses between breaths stretch just a little too long for comfort.

At least he's breathing at all, Martin thinks with a pang. Jon goes deadly still then, and Martin's hand twitches in an unconscious desire to check for a pulse – some secondary sign to reassure himself that Jon really is just sleeping. Several prolonged seconds pass before Jon finally sucks in another deep, rattling breath.

At the gentle *knock-knock* on the doorframe, Martin jumps. The door to Document Storage, already cracked an inch or so, creaks as it swings wider.

"Jon?" Georgie calls softly, peeking through the gap. "You in here? I was just – oh," she says when she sees Martin. An instant later she notices Jon, tossing and turning on the cot behind him. "What happened? Is he okay?"

"He… well, he's fine now. I think. Just… sleeping."

"Wait," she says, fully entering the room and approaching to watch Jon with genuine astonishment, "you actually got him to *sleep?"*

"Not really? He was having trouble staying vertical, so I told him he should lie down until the vertigo passed, and…" Martin shrugs. He's still taken aback by the fact that Jon complied without argument. "I don't think he was planning on falling asleep, but he was out as soon as his head hit the pillow." Jon's fingers spasm, brow wrinkling as he cringes and curls into a tighter ball. Martin sighs. "Doesn't look very restful, though."

"Oh, he's always been a fitful sleeper. Even back in uni. He didn't used to be *that* bad, though. Or – he was, but in short bursts. Not… drawn out like this. He'd usually wake himself up after a minute or so of…" She frowns as Jon goes taut in a full-body spasm. "That."

"I guess the Eye doesn't want the dream to end," Martin says quietly. Jon twists his fingers against the sheets, gathering the fabric in a death grip. Martin's hand twitches again, inching just a bit closer to Jon's. He resists the urge to uncurl Jon's fingers, to give him a hand to hold instead.

“Last I checked, the nightmares weren’t as nightmarish anymore,” Georgie says. “I mean, by his own admission, he treated mine and Naomi’s dreams like social calls.”

Martin tears his eyes away from Jon to glance at Georgie, a puzzled expression on his face. “Naomi?”

“Naomi Herne. He said hers was the first statement he took in person.”

“Yeah, back when he was still putting on the skeptic act. And she filed a complaint against him for being…” Martin smiles and shakes his head. “Well, *Jon.*”

“I’m not surprised,” Georgie says with an amused snort. “They seem pretty friendly now, though.”

“What, seriously?”

“Yeah. They do have a similar sense of humor. She doesn’t seem to scare easy, which probably helps. And she has a cat, so…”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Jon… has trouble *initiating* when it comes to having a social life,” Georgie says slowly. “Just wanting to talk doesn’t strike him as a good enough reason to start a conversation. He worries he’ll just be an annoyance. It’s like he needs to come up with some concrete justification for reaching out. But Naomi is always excited to talk about the Duchess – that’s her cat – which means Jon is less likely to feel like he’s bothering her. Which also makes him less likely to talk himself out of sending a text. Plus, it’s a safe, *normal* thing to talk about, and he loves cats, so…” She shrugs. “It’s good for him.”

“Huh.”

“Yeah. Gives her an excuse to stay in touch, too, I think.” Georgie gives Martin a significant look. “Lonely, you know?”

“I…” Martin rubs the back of his neck, not meeting her eye. “Yeah.”

“Anyway, I thought… well, he said the nightmares weren’t as bad as they used to be.” Georgie frowns as she watches Jon’s lips twist, his teeth bared as he sucks in a sharp breath. “I don’t know. At least he’s actually sleeping. I don’t think he’s slept for more than forty minutes at a time since he got out of the hospital.”

“That was nearly a *month* ago.” Martin gapes at her, horrified. “How has he even been able to *function* with that level of sleep deprivation?”

“The same way he survived for six months without a heartbeat. And why he has to consciously remind himself to breathe sometimes, and has a tendency to forget to blink, and doesn’t have much of an appetite for normal food anymore. He’s not fully human–”

Georgie must sense Martin preparing to go on the offensive, because she holds up both hands palms-out, placating.

“I’m not saying that he’s *inhuman,* either. *He* might be convinced that he’s more monster than human, but he’s still a person. He’s just… different now, and he’s resigned to that, but he hasn’t yet gotten it through his head that there are people who will accept him regardless.” She sighs. “My original point was that he doesn’t have the same physiological needs that most people do. But he still does need to sleep from time to time. Sleep deprivation clearly takes a toll on him.”

“Figures,” Martin huffs, blowing hair out of his eyes. “He’s always treated sleep as optional.”

“Yeah,” Georgie says with a laugh. “He’s operated on a bare minimum of sleep for as long as I’ve known him. Part casual self-neglect, part allergy to the general *concept* of resting, and part legitimate insomnia. I told him more than once he should get evaluated for a sleep disorder, but… well, you know Jon. And now that he really *does* need less sleep than the average person, of course he’s pushing the limits even further.”

Martin looks down at Jon and thinks, as he has countless times before: *He really does make it so damn difficult to take care of him.*

It's simultaneously heartbreaking and frustrating, even irritating at times – but somehow, whenever Jon doubles down, it only makes Martin do the same. It's become such a familiar dance, a challenge even, and more often than not, Martin wins those contests of will: badger Jon persistently enough, strike just the right balance between expressing worry and wagging a finger, and eventually he'll agree to take care of himself. In the beginning, he would grump and roll his eyes and drag his feet; as time went on, though, he became more receptive to it. Some days, he even seemed to enjoy – albeit in a guarded, almost shy way – being cajoled into sharing lunch or tea or conversation.

Unthinkingly, Martin brushes a lock of hair away from Jon's forehead, damp with cold sweat. Wishes he could smooth the tension away as easily.

"Did you two talk about things?" Georgie asks.

"Some of it."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I…" Martin bites his lip. "I feel like I shouldn't want to, but I – I sort of do?"

"Well. I have some time to listen." Georgie takes a seat towards the foot of the cot. "How'd it go? Bearing in mind this isn't the tunnels."

"It's… a lot."

"Mm. I can imagine."

“I mean, he…” Martin runs a hand through his hair with a disbelieving, nervous chuckle. “He told me he wants to grow old with me?”

“He *said* that?” Georgie laughs outright. “God, he’s gotten even more saccharine than I thought.”

“It’s just – not something I would have ever imagined him saying? To *anyone,* let alone me.” Martin can feel his palms sweating now; he rubs them on his trousers, hoping to dispel some of the clamminess. “He just seems so… changed.”

“He is, but… maybe not as drastically as it might seem. Rather, this is *him,* just – without all the walls.” Georgie chuckles, shaking her head. “And less of a filter, apparently. Sorry.”

“Sorry?” Martin repeats, perplexed.

“He’s dumping a lot on you all at once. I can talk to him, if you want. Tell him to slow down, give you some space to process it all.”

“I… I don’t…” Martin pauses, coming up against an invisible wall between a daunting realization and the explicit acknowledgment thereof. He makes several abortive attempts at speech before he manages to voice the confession: “I don’t think I want him to?”

Left to himself for too long, Martin can feel himself start to come unmoored. The truth the Lonely is so loath to have him accept, let alone speak aloud, is this: he doesn’t *want* that to happen. Not anymore. Being in the presence of others, actively taking part in a conversation, seeking comfort in touch – all of these things still feel grating, unnatural even, but a return to solitude *frightens* him in a way it hasn’t for months. It’s an old terror, one that he had become numb to since accepting the Lonely’s embrace. Now, it seems to have returned with a vengeance. The lingering, ambient discomfort that comes with human connection is quickly becoming preferable to that looming fear of absence.

Still…

“It feels like – going against my nature, every minute I spend talking to him, to *you,* to… anyone, really. I think I just… forgot how *not* to be alone?”

On some level, Martin wonders whether he ever knew in the first place. He’s had friends, certainly, but every relationship, no matter how ostensibly reciprocal, has been laced with an undercurrent of insecurity: a loud, nagging voice in the back of his mind, reminding him of the consequences should he allow himself to be *too much* or *not enough.* Always primed for rejection, he strove to make himself pleasant, to make himself useful, to make himself accommodating and unobtrusive and easy. Sometimes, he felt like an impostor, fooling people into believing that he was worth keeping around. He was always counting down the moments until someone would see through the façade to the inadequacy within, realize he wasn’t worth the trouble, and leave him behind.

“The Lonely… I don’t think I want it anymore,” he says, “but it feels – wrong, to leave it behind. Not *me*, somehow.”

“Hmm.” Georgie drums her fingers against her chin. “I can understand that. Isolation can become so habitual that it starts to feel like home, and anything trying to break through feels like an invasion. You start to feel *safer* alone, and you deny those moments when you catch yourself wishing things were different, because loneliness has become such a part of you that you don’t know who you would be without it.”

“I… yeah,” Martin says, taken aback by having it laid out so succinctly.

“In my experience, it helps to remind yourself that your brain is lying to you when it tells you you’d be better off alone. In your case, I guess it’s your brain *and* the god of abandonment issues or whatever, but… unless you’re keen to fight a god, it might be best to start with your brain. That’s something you actually *can* exert some control over, with enough practice. And I think it might make it harder for the fear to get to you if you’re not trapped in the kind of mindset it thrives on.”

“I guess,” Martin says, looking off to the side. Once again, he rests his arm on the cot, his hand mere inches away from Jon’s, sheet still clenched tightly in his fist.

“But you don’t have to take it on all at once,” Georgie says. “If you have to set boundaries, Jon will understand. And even if he didn’t, you still have a right to enforce them. Not to

sound cliché, but you shouldn't set yourself on fire to keep others warm."

The problem is, of course, that the concept of putting himself first is as alien to Martin as the idea of being… well, not lonely.

"I can hear the cogs turning," Georgie says with a gentle smile. "Look, it's easier to accept a concept intellectually than it is to actually apply it to yourself. There's a learning curve. But it's a lesson worth learning. Took me way too long to learn it myself. If it helps, start with – to use another cliché – 'put your own oxygen mask on before helping others with theirs.' *Then* you can move onto practicing self-care without feeling guilty."

"What are you, a therapist?"

"Nope. I've just had several years of experience being on the receiving end."

"O-oh. Uh, sorry–"

"Don't be. It's not something to be ashamed of. At this point, I could probably fill out CBT worksheets in my sleep. With enough practice, it does start to become intuitive." She shrugs. "Anyway, you can't fix Jon, and I don't think he expects you to. You can support him, you can care about him, but you can't *make* him better. That's true in any relationship, but… well, obviously it's – a bit more complicated in this case."

"I just… I want him to be okay, and I don't know how to help–" Martin startles when Jon kicks one leg out violently, entangling himself in the sheets as he pulls it back and curls into himself again. Martin lowers his voice. "He – he was so starving he *passed out,* Georgie, he wasn't breathing and it was like the hospital all over again and – and I don't think I have any other stories I can tell that would count as *statements*–"

"Wait, you gave him a statement?"

"Y-yeah."

“I thought he didn’t want–”

“I don’t know if he would have agreed if he was conscious, but he… he wasn’t waking up, and I didn’t know what else to *do,*” Martin says pleadingly, watching Georgie carefully to gauge her reaction. “He needed a fresh statement. Old statements aren’t enough, and he said new ones cause nightmares regardless of whether he takes them in person or not, so we can’t just give him new written statements that come in, and I – I don’t know what we’re going to do if he gets that bad again.”

Martin remembers the look in Jon’s eyes: glossy, glazed and almost luminous with an alien sort of hunger, but shot through with a terror more devastating than Martin had ever seen from him. The unflinching intent with which he hurt himself; the erratic rhythm of his breathing; the way his dilated pupils swallowed the irises just before he fell unconscious. He was lost to the world in those moments, alert but unresponsive, seemingly unable to hear a word Martin was saying.

And the abject horror on his face when he commanded Martin to stay away…

“He was… he was so *scared*. Of *himself.* He doesn’t want to hurt anyone, but he – he can’t think straight when he’s like that.”

“Shit,” Georgie says, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“I think working in the archives gives some immunity? I’ve given a few statements, before we knew how all this works, and he never showed up in my nightmares. Tim’s or Sasha’s, either, as far as I know. And I actually… well, I don’t actually mind giving him statements, to be honest? It’s – hard, to relive it, but it’s… cathartic, too. To get it all out, to be able to actually – describe it in words. Maybe I’d feel differently if I came in off the street – or was approached – and I didn’t know him, and wasn’t protected from the side effects, but – as it is, I would be *fine* giving him statements when he needs them, and that’s not – that’s not a huge sacrifice on my part, is what I’m saying. But I don’t… I don’t think I have any more stories to give.”

“Okay,” Georgie mutters to herself, rubbing her temples. “Okay. We… we’ll figure something out. Obviously, Jon needs to be part of that conversation. Maybe Daisy, too – Jon seems to trust her.”

“Why would he trust her?” Martin asks, incredulous, almost incensed. “She kidnapped him. She – she *slit his throat,* she was going to–”

“I know. I don’t really understand it either. But supposedly she’s changed a lot, and she’s an Avatar like he is. I get the feeling he might want her there.”

“Fine,” Martin says in a clipped voice, even though *fine* seems like a wildly inaccurate descriptor to him. “What about Basira? And Melanie?”

“Melanie… with Jon’s permission, I’ll invite her, just so she’s not out of the loop, but I doubt she’ll take us up on it.” Georgie frowns, rubbing her jaw absently. “As for Basira… I don’t know. Something Jon said…”

“What?”

“I’m…” Georgie pauses, tilting her head from side to side as she deliberates. *“Concerned.* About how Basira might approach the situation.”

It takes a few seconds for Martin to work out the implication. When he does, he pales, mouth going slack.

“You – you don’t think she’d *hurt* him?”

“I don’t *think* so,” Georgie says haltingly, “but there’s a chance she might put the option back on the table if she thinks he’s too dangerous. She wouldn’t *like* it, but… well, she seems utilitarian. I think she’ll do whatever she thinks she needs to do. Even if she doesn’t threaten him directly, I still…” She sighs. “Jon’s not in a good place right now, mentally. Frankly, I

worry about exposing him to anything that might encourage a better-off-dead mindset, even if it's just… *perceived* condemnation."

"God, this…" Martin laughs, high and stressed. "This entire situation is…"

"I know. But we'll figure something out. And in the meantime, make sure to take care of yourself too, alright?"

"Yeah," Martin says, only half-listening.

"I mean it. Jon cares about you. He wouldn't want you to run yourself into the ground on his behalf."

Before Martin can respond, Jon jumps in his sleep again with a strangled gasp. Flinging one arm out, his hand brushes against Martin and seizes a fistful of his sleeve. Tightening his grip, he tugs on Martin's arm to bring it closer, practically hugging it in a vice grip. Almost instantly Jon calms, tense muscles relaxing, pained expression going slack, a relieved sigh shuddering out of him as he nuzzles into the crook of Martin's elbow.

Martin can feel his cheeks burning. He shoots a preemptive glower in Georgie's direction, daring her to laugh – but she only smiles.

"Well, I'll leave you to it," she says, rising to her feet. "Have him text me when he's awake, will you?"

"Y-y-yeah," Martin stammers. "I'll – I'll see you later."

He barely notices her departure, instead staring down at Jon with a vague sense of wonder. Jon holds fast to him like he's a lifeline, and Martin can feel him breathing warm and steady through the fabric of his sleeve. The cold sweat on his brow seems to be evaporating now. Martin shifts his position to more fully face the cot. As he reaches up with his free hand to

brush away the hair clinging to Jon's forehead, a slow, shy smile begins to spread across Martin's face.

It won't be long before Jon succumbs to another fit of tossing and turning, but in the meantime, Martin simply watches him with faint awe and renewed affection. He's never seen Jon look so at peace, and he takes the opportunity to memorize the sight.

When another shard of the Lonely shatters and crumbles away, Martin is too preoccupied to note its passing.

With a startled yelp, Jon sits bolt upright. Gulping down air in deep, ragged breaths, he looks wildly around the room, not taking anything in: it's all visual noise, smudges of loud colors and sinister shadows, all of it closing in and bearing down on him.

Something next to him – *close too close too close* – moves abruptly, rising up and looming over and settling down beside him. Jon cringes away, only to find that his legs are pinned together by *something*, restricting his movement, and there's dirt in his mouth, and dirt in his throat, and dirt in his lungs, and he cannot breathe, cannot breathe, cannot breathe, *cannot breathe*–

"Jon," comes a voice – somehow both close and far away. "Listen, you're – you're okay, you're safe."

Trapped in that liminal twilight haze between sleep and waking, Jon gropes blindly for a handhold, an anchor, something real and solid and–

His hand collides with something soft, warm – *wool,* his mind supplies, and then:

...wool is able to absorb nearly one-third of its weight in water…

He shakes his head to chase away the stray scrap of trivia, digging his fingers into the fabric to ground himself.

"It was just a dream," says the voice again – a kind voice, a *safe* voice – and Jon takes a shuddering breath, like a drowning man clawing for air.

Then a hand closes over his, and that light pressure is enough plunge Jon right back below the surface. He thrashes violently, desperate to break away from the throbbing litany of *too close cannot move trapped held pinned in place screeching metal crushing in and down and down and down and Karolina beholds her encroaching fate with tranquil acceptance and the Archivist feels her skull crack and her chest cave in and her lungs collapse and still she smiles and she watches as the Archivist flails uselessly for an escape that does not will not cannot exist and the door bulges and splinters and explodes inward and the deluge rushes in and the Archivist is drowning, drowning, drowning–*

The hand draws back, the pressure lifts, the train car finally collapses, and the last remnants of hazy sleep begin to disintegrate.

"S-sorry, I didn't mean to – it's – it's just me, Jon."

"Martin?" Jon chokes out, tightening his grasp on Martin's jumper – *wool, warm, soft, safe* – still bunched in one hand. He reaches out his other arm to find a second handhold.

"Yeah. I – I won't hurt you."

Safe.

"I know," Jon says groggily. The tension drains away and he sags against Martin's side, breathing in slow, deliberate swallows. "'M sorry. Dream."

The first time he's slept, *truly* slept since leaving the hospital, and of course it had to be while Karolina Górka was dreaming. *Of course.*

“Do you… want to talk about it?”

“Buried,” Jon mumbles, face partially burrowed in Martin’s shoulder. *Self-explanatory,* he figures.

“Oh,” Martin says in a broken whisper. Jon opens one eye to see an expression of helpless pity on Martin’s face. “That’s…”

“’S okay,” Jon assures. “I’m okay.”

Reluctantly, he releases his hold on Martin and leans away. When he stretches – partly out of habit, partly to reassure himself that he can – there’s still something pinioning his legs. A spark of panic tears through him before he realizes that it’s just the sheets, tangled hopelessly around his lower half. With some difficulty, he manages to extricate himself and kick the blankets away.

“How long was I out?”

“Couple hours.”

“Have you just been sitting here the whole time?” Jon frowns apologetically. “You could’ve woken me.”

“Wake you when you were *actually sleeping* for once? Uh, no. How are you feeling?”

“Better,” Jon says simply. “I’d like to know how you’re doing.”

“I’m – fine,” Martin says. Jon raises an eyebrow. “Really, I am. I’m more worried about–”

“Me, I know. And I’m worried about you. I… don’t think you’re just ‘fine.’” Martin gives a noncommittal grunt. “I really *would* like to know where you are in all this. How you’re faring. How I can help.”

Martin remains silent, lips pressed tightly together as if to seal them.

“I know I was – distracted, earlier, but I… I really do want to help,” Jon tries again. “Please let me help?”

Something finally gives and Martin slouches with a sigh.

“I’m… still trying to figure it all out,” he says slowly. “I don’t *know* what I’m feeling most of the time, besides… worried, and…”

“Lonely.”

“Yeah,” Martin says with a wistful smile.

“You don’t have to be,” Jon says quietly.

“I know.”

“I’m not – I’m not trying to–” Jon sighs. “I just… I need you to know.”

“I know,” Martin says again.

Jon bites back the nagging impulse to ask all the questions itching on his tongue: *Have you decided what to do about Peter? How Lonely are you now? Do you need closeness or distance? What should I be doing, or not doing? What can I do to take care of you? Where do we stand?*

What do you see, when you look at me?

Jon looks away and shuts his eyes.

"I'm sorry you had to see me like that, by the way. It wasn't my intention to frighten you. Or to…" He swallows, fighting back the nausea rising in him. "To compel you."

"It's alright–"

"It's not," Jon says brusquely. He makes a conscious effort to soften his tone before he continues. "I don't want to be the thing that frightens you."

"You're not," Martin says with a bemused frown. "I know you didn't mean to use your powers on me."

"You were afraid. I could…" Jon closes his eyes again and forces himself to say the words. "I could *taste* it."

And the Archivist in him *savored* it.

"I wasn't afraid *of* you, Jon. I was afraid *for* you. You looked terrified, and in pain, and you were *hurting* yourself, and I didn't know how to help, and then I didn't know if you were going to wake up, and… *that's* what scared me." Jon's skepticism must show on his face, because there's an intensity to the words when Martin reiterates: "Not you. Never you."

"Never say never," Jon says with a brittle, self-deprecating smile.

“I’m serious, Jon.”

So am I.

“I… I think we need to talk about where to go from here,” Martin says after a moment, averting his eyes.

“I agree.”

“You do?” Martin looks back to him, blinking in surprise.

“Yes,” Jon says, adjusting his position to sit cross-legged and pivoting to face Martin fully. “The others need to know what happened. I can’t be trusted not to hurt anyone–”

“No, that’s not what I–” Martin sighs. “I’m worried about what could happen if things get that bad again.”

“That’s what I’m saying. I came dangerously close to – to *hurting* someone. We need some plan in place, some way to keep me contained so that I don’t–”

“Stop, stop, stop,” Martin says, holding up a hand. Jon tilts his head, bewildered. “I’m not – I’m not talking about keeping you *contained*, Jon. I’m worried about *you.* This goes beyond a compulsion you can beat with enough willpower. You were starving. You… you could have *died*.”

“We don’t know that.”

“Exactly! *We don’t know,* and I don’t want to find out.”

“Well, yes, but–”

“No ‘but.’ There has to be some way to keep you fed without hurting anyone. We just need to–”

“Martin, terror and suffering is the entire point. That’s what sustains it. Mine, my victim’s, doesn’t matter as long as it hurts.” Jon laughs, hollow and bitter. “It’s not like there’s an ethical way to – to *harvest trauma*–”

“We don’t know that for sure,” Martin says fiercely, “and I’m not ready to just *give up.* I would hope you aren’t, either.”

“I…” Jon busies himself with tucking a flyaway lock of hair behind his ear, using it as an excuse to break eye contact.

“Please, Jon.”

Martin takes his hand, prompting Jon to look up again. A familiar guilt rises up in him, shame at always being the one to put that expression of desperate worry on Martin’s face.

It’s enough to make him agree, albeit in a whisper, “Okay.”

“Right,” Martin says, giving Jon’s hand a brief squeeze. “Georgie and I were talking while you were asleep. She wants to be part of the discussion, so long as you’re alright with it.”

“Of course. We should probably tell Daisy and Basira as well.”

Martin appears to hesitate.

“I was thinking the three of us can meet first,” he says carefully, “and then we can open up the discussion after.”

“Why?” Jon observes the slight concavity that forms as Martin chews the inside of his cheek. “Martin?”

“Georgie’s worried about Basira’s reaction,” Martin says abruptly, “and honestly, so am I.”

“She needs to know.”

“I – I know, it’s just…”

“We have so few allies; we can’t afford secrecy and mistrust. And…”

And of all of them, Basira is the one Jon can trust to do what must be done if things go wrong. If *he* goes wrong.

“Basira is a strategist,” he says. “She’s good at viewing a problem from multiple angles, considering all the variables, predicting potential solutions and outcomes and then weighing them with a… pragmatic eye.”

“The pragmatism is what worries me.”

“I want her there,” Jon says simply.

“Okay,” Martin says, but Jon can tell he’s not thrilled about it. “What about Daisy?”

“Yes,” Jon says immediately. At that, Martin somehow manages to look even less thrilled.

“And Melanie?”

“I… I’m alright with her being there, but I don’t want her to feel pressured. She’s dealing with enough as it is.”

“Okay. I can let everyone know, but I think you should get some more rest before–”

“No.”

“Jon–”

“I need to confront this now. While I’m still… in my right mind,” Jon says, plucking absently at his sleeve with his free hand. “Sober.”

For a brief second, Martin looks ready to argue, but then he capitulates with a sigh.

“Okay,” he says, releasing Jon’s hand and standing up. “I’ll… round everyone up, I suppose.”

“Thank you,” Jon murmurs.

Martin glances back several times as he leaves the room. Jon waits until he’s out of sight before he puts his face in his hands, sighs, and tries to brace himself for a conversation he dreads almost as much as the Coffin.

A short time later, the group – minus Melanie – convenes in the tunnels, five chairs arranged in a loose circle with a sixth left empty off to the side. Sitting almost directly across from Jon, Basira watches him with eyes narrowed, arms folded, and mouth pressed into a firm line.

“What do you mean you ‘almost’ relapsed?”

“Martin suggested reading a new statement that came in earlier this evening,” Jon tells her in a straightforward near-monotone. Pushing through the discomfort it brings, he forces himself to meet her eyes when he speaks. “I agreed, without informing him that reading a fresh written statement has the same repercussions that taking a live statement in person does. I was going to feed, knowing that it would hurt an innocent person.”

“But you didn’t,” Martin says emphatically. “You stopped yourself.”

“Only because Helen pointed out the cognitive dissonance. Took a monster to remind me not to be a monster.” Jon scoffs. “Even then, I almost did it anyway.”

“But you *didn’t,*” Martin repeats.

“What about next time?” Basira asks, unimpressed. “When you get hungry again, what then?”

“That’s what we’re here to discuss,” Georgie says, assuming the role of mediator the moment she notices Martin’s scowl deepen. “We need to find some way to keep things from getting that bad in the first place.”

Thoroughly unnerved, Jon squirms in his seat. Basira has had him pinned under her stare for several minutes now, and she seems unlikely to cut him free any time soon. But what right does he have to object to scrutiny, given what he is?

“What did you do with the statement?” Basira demands. “The one you were going to read?”

“I… asked Martin to burn it.”

Her eyes flick to Martin. “And did you?”

“N-not yet–”

“Burn it. As soon as we’re done here.” She shifts her attention back to Jon. “Is there an alternative to new statements?”

Jon doesn’t miss a beat when he answers, matter-of-fact: “No.”

“Jon,” Martin and Georgie say simultaneously, with the tenor of a reprimand.

“I’m not – I’m not trying to be difficult,” he replies, finally breaking eye contact with Basira to look down at his hands. “It’s just… reality. I’m an Archive dedicated the curation of statements – of fear.”

“You never actually explained what that means,” Basira says. “You being the Archive.”

“It’s… hard to put into words.”

“Try.”

Jon sighs, taking a moment to collect his thoughts.

“The Archive is more than – paper and files and tapes. The reason it needs to be housed in a living mind rather than a mere building is because the statements themselves have a living

quality to them." He crosses his arms, brow furrowing as he struggles with his phrasing. "They need to be immersed in a steady supply of fear. A shelving unit, a filing cabinet, a hard drive, a cassette tape – those can't provide the ideal habitat that they need to thrive. The Archivist is–"

"–simply a battery, a ready source of constant terror–"

He cuts the Archive off with a frustrated snarl, digging his fingernails into his arms.

"Hey," Georgie says, "you're alright. Take your time."

Jon has to spend a few minutes counting breaths before he feels ready to try again.

"What I was–" He cuts himself off preemptively, half-expecting the Archive to intrude again. Once he realizes the words are his own, he clears his throat to recover from the false start. "What I was *trying* to say is – without a living consciousness to contextualize them, the statements are just… stories. When I consume a statement – read it, hear it, doesn't matter – I See the events play out through the victim's eyes. My lived experience of it is essential to the recording and preservation of the story. I need to be able to recall how it *feels,* not just summarize the major points of interest." He sighs again. "And… that's also the point of reliving the events in the nightmares. All of it is to keep the memory fresh. To keep the story – the fear – alive."

When he looks up to see all four of them staring at him, he begins to rub his arms absently, increasingly self-conscious. He can feel the semicircle grooves leftover from where his fingernails cut into the skin.

"So… yeah," he finishes awkwardly. "The Archive is defined by the statements and the fear that embodies them. The Beholding always hungers for *more,* and the Archive is a… a receptacle for all of its knowledge. The continual curation of new statements is what sustains it. Without that, it withers."

"And dies?" Basira asks.

The question isn't unkind, per se, simply businesslike: an eagerness to discover an answer heedless of whatever messy emotions it might elicit. Jon understands that impulse all too well. Not for the first time, he wonders whether Jonah had a secondary, hidden motive for recruiting Basira: a backup Archivist, in the event that his first choice be unable to endure the process.

"I still don't know if it would physically kill me," he replies, "but the hungrier I get, the more I forget myself. I'm liable to do things that I wouldn't normally do, monstrous things." He huffs. "And at the same time, giving in to that hunger will *also* make me more monstrous over time. It seems like… either way, I – I can't avoid losing sight of… well, *me.* The human part of me. Whatever's left of it."

And wouldn't losing himself be a death of sorts?

In a way, Daisy died the moment the Hunt recaptured her. What she became *was* her, undoubtedly, but only a small piece of her. The creature that Basira eventually killed… it was an echo of all the hated, feared parts of herself that Daisy had tried so hard to starve out. The rest of her – all the things that altogether made her *Daisy* – had long since been burned away.

If Jon didn't manage to find a way out of that doomed future, he suspects that his ultimate fate may have been similar: all the fragile scraps of himself that still belonged to him, every sliver of personal identity, every shred of humanity crushed and buried beneath an ever-swelling ocean of dispassionate knowledge. The Archive would have carried on expanding and curating until, one day, it would have either collapsed under its own weight or simply run out of things to catalogue, then to waste away – but by then, it would have borne no resemblance to the original owner of its ravaged vessel.

Some endings play out in merciless increments. Jon has witnessed – has *caused* – more than his fair share of pointless, drawn out suffering. It would have been only fitting for his end to follow a similar path.

"Well, shit," Basira mutters.

"What about statements given consensually?" Martin asks tentatively. "The one I gave you seemed to satisfy the Archive, or – or however you want to call it. And in the past when I've given you statements, they never gave me nightmares, so…"

“Anyone aligned with the Eye has a measure of protection from the Archivist,” Jon answers. “I was never privy to Tim’s or Sasha’s nightmares, either. Once Melanie and Basira started working here, their dreams were cut off from me as well. And… last time, Daisy ended up signing an employment contract after returning from the Buried. Same result.”

“Is it just the archival staff, or any Institute employee?” Basira asks.

“I… don’t know,” Jon says thoughtfully. “If I had to hazard a guess, I would say that it’s restricted to those most strongly connected with the Eye. Archival assistants, primarily. *Possibly* the research department, or at least those individuals who are the most… *compatible* with the Beholding, so to speak, though I’m not positive.”

It's more likely that it's only the archival assistants, tethered as they are to the Archivist, but he doesn't know for *sure,* and… now that the question has been posed, Jon craves an answer.

“But – but experimenting isn’t worth the risk,” he says, mostly in an attempt to dissuade himself from pursuing the matter any further. He’s pleasantly surprised to hear the confidence in his own voice.

As if satisfied with that answer, Basira gives a tiny nod. Jon doubts it’s meant as a vote of confidence or as approval, but her posture does relax somewhat. It's unlikely that she *trusts* him by any stretch of the imagination, but for the moment she seems to have decided that he isn’t an imminent threat, at least.

It feels remarkably, disconcertingly like passing a test he didn’t realize was in progress.

Georgie’s eyes are fixed on the floor, her chin propped in her hand and a contemplative pout on her face. Martin has his lips pressed together, as if biting back an objection. Daisy is the only one looking directly at Jon. She hasn’t said a word since Jon gave his confession, but now her head is cocked slightly to the side, as if she's weighing her words.

“I have a lot of stories from my Sectioned days,” she muses. “I could–”

“What would you say if I told you that you should go hunt a few monsters?” Jon says immediately.

“I…” Daisy stalls for a moment, and then gives a resigned sigh, understanding. “I would be worried that I wouldn’t be able to stop at a few,” she says grudgingly. Her shoulders slump as she adds, “Or at monsters.”

“Exactly.”

“But wouldn’t it be different?” she asks, perking up again. “The prey doesn’t consent to the hunt. The fear is taken, not freely given. But a statement – that can be consensual.”

“The Hunt cares about the terror of the prey in the moment. The Eye cares about the terror of the victim in the retelling. The consent aspect is only relevant in terms of whether and how it influences the fear. The fear is *all* they care about, and I doubt anything benign can come of consuming the fear our patrons want, consensual or no.”

“Do you remember what I said about harm reduction?” Georgie has been sitting quietly with her thoughts for so long, Jon startles at the sound of her voice when she rejoins the conversation. “We need to keep you from getting so hungry that it changes who you are, and new statements are the only way to satisfy that hunger. Correct?”

“Yes, but–”

“According to you, right now your options are statements or starvation.”

Struck with a fleeting impulse for petulance, Jon has to swallow a biting retort. It’s an old habit, hackles rising at having his own words turned against him – something for which Georgie has always had an aptitude. Between an impressive memory, an analytical nature, and a tolerance for confrontation, she’s never been shy to speculate on what’s really going on in Jon’s head at any given moment. That ability to dissect his motivations and insecurities

and cognitive distortions – it used to feel like being flayed alive, all the vulnerable bits of him exposed and shoved under a spotlight.

It's probably fair to say that his inability to weather that level of scrutiny was a big factor contributing to their eventual breakup: his guarded nature was incompatible with her more straightforward approach to relationships.

"I realize it's not ideal," she's saying now, "but taking statements given with informed consent seems like the most ethical choice."

"It isn't just *unideal,* it's – it's–" Jon puts one hand over his eyes, rubbing his forehead and fighting back the urge to shout. "This isn't a solution."

It's still feeding the Eye. It's still capitalizing on other people's trauma. And the stories Daisy has to offer… Jon has to wonder how many of them feature Daisy as a victim or a bystander, and whether those outnumber the ones where she herself is the object of fear. He's taken statements from Avatars before. Some of them were indeed stories of experiencing fear firsthand. Others, though… the fear threaded through the statement came not from the teller, but from their victims.

Jon isn't keen on siphoning off the secondhand terror of Daisy's prey. Maybe he can't afford to be picky, but if there's one thing he's learned, it's that lines have to be drawn somewhere.

"We can keep looking for a better alternative," Georgie says, "but for now… think of it as a stopgap measure." Sensing Jon's continued aversion to the idea, she continues: "If your own wellbeing isn't enough to convince you, consider how you starving would affect other people."

"It might make me more dangerous," Jon says quietly.

"I mean – maybe, I guess? But that's not what I meant." At Jon's blank expression, Georgie sighs. "When you suffer, it hurts more than just you. You have people who care about you. They're sitting with you right now."

“Still, I – I can’t ask that of–”

“Oh, come off it, Sims,” Daisy says, rolling her eyes. “You crawled into hell to drag me out when all I’d done was treat you like prey. And even after seeing what it was like, you went back in and brought me back a second time.”

“Yes, but–”

“If I sign a contract to work in the Archives, it’ll stop you showing up in my dreams, right?”

“Yes. I’m – I’m sorry, again, about–”

“And it’ll keep new nightmares from cropping up if I give you more statements?”

“Well, yes–”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Jon opens and closes his mouth soundlessly several times.

“I – I – I don’t want you to sign yourself over to the Beholding just so I can – treat your memories like a – like a *snack*” – Jon flings one arm out in a sweeping gesture, supplementing the disgust with which he says the word – “without facing any consequences!”

He looks around at the others, arm still outstretched in the air, waiting for someone to back him up on this. When no one does, he huffs a bewildered chuckle and withdraws his arm to comb his fingers through his hair instead. Why is he the only one making a fuss about this?

He thought he could count on *Basira* at least to raise an objection, but she's just staring off to the side, apparently lost in thought.

"I was already considering signing a contract anyway," Daisy says. "Basira said you had a theory that the Slaughter's effects on Melanie were slowed by her connection to the Eye, yeah?"

"Yes," he admits cautiously.

"We were thinking – maybe it'll do the same for me with the Hunt."

"Did it help last time?" Basira cuts in, as if she'd never tapped out of the discussion.

"I'm not *positive*," Jon hedges. "It was a theory we'd considered, yes, but it's not like we had much of a sample size to test that hypothesis."

He wishes he'd thought to ask these kinds of questions after the world ended, when he actually had a chance of getting the answers. In his defense, he had a lot on his mind.

"And it didn't entirely silence the call of the Hunt," he adds, looking back to Daisy. "You still deteriorated the longer you refused to answer it."

"Hm." Basira's contemplative expression returns as she withdraws to commune with her own thoughts again.

"Well, it's not like I'm going anywhere anyway," Daisy says with a shrug. "Basira's trapped here. So are you. And I don't think I can be trusted to leave here alone without giving in to the Hunt again. I have nothing to lose by signing a contract, and…"

Her eyes gravitate towards Jon's throat. Mechanically, he reaches up to adjust the scarf around his neck, to ensure the scar there is covered. At the guilty expression on Daisy's face,

Jon has to look away.

“If it can help,” Daisy continues, “then I think telling some stories is the absolute least I can do after… everything.”

“How many do you have, do you think?” Georgie asks, once again settling into problem-solving mode.

“Don’t know. Several. A couple dozen? Maybe more, depending on how far we can stretch the definition of a statement.”

“I have a handful as well,” Basira says, her tone wholly unreadable. “Not many, but… a few of the things that happened while you were dead should count as statements, I think.”

“I – I couldn’t ask you to–”

“I’m not offering; I’m just inventorying all the options on the table,” Basira says with an air of finality.

Curiously, Martin seems to tense at Basira’s words, shifting restively in his seat and looking askance at her.

“How much time does that buy us, do you think?” he asks, throwing brief, surreptitious glances in Basira’s direction. “How long would a few dozen statements last you?”

“I… I don’t know,” Jon says, still altogether uncomfortable with the idea. “If I ration myself, then – a while, hopefully? Hypothetically? But…”

He’s reluctant to elaborate, but when did keeping secrets and denying reality ever help?

“Last time, it kept getting progressively worse. I needed to feed more and more frequently in order to stave off the hunger. The side effects of abstaining grew more severe. I want to hope that it will be different this time. Maybe giving in to the hunger in the first place only encouraged the Archivist’s… *evolution.* Whet my appetite. It’s possible that refraining from hunting will… I don’t know, slow the process? Maybe? B-but at the same time…”

He trails off, lips parted, unable to say the words.

“Jon?” Martin prompts gently.

“It’s… I’m sorry, but I – I have trouble being optimistic about it. Coming back didn’t… it didn’t reset the Archivist’s progress. I’m the product of what I’ve done up to this point, even if I’m the only one who remembers any of it. I still have all the marks. And… the Archive fledged and thrived in the apocalypse.”

“Meaning?” Basira leans forward, watching him intently.

“The Archive is accustomed to a *feast,* not a famine. Millions of statements filtering through every moment without pause. Even when humanity started dying off – when there was less and less fear to go around, when even the monsters started to decay in that place – the Archive was still sated, because I could See *everything.* No matter how few and far between those pockets of terror became, as long as fear was being suffered *somewhere*, the Archive had a steady source of sustenance.”

It wouldn’t have lasted forever, of course. Everything has an ending. But that had still been a ways off when Jon left that place.

“I probably would have been one of the last things standing, by the end,” he says softly.

“And you think the hunger will be worse this time because you aren’t used to being hungry,” Basira says.

“More or less,” Jon mumbles, shamefaced. “Coming back to the past, to *now*... there was no transition between plenty and want. I – the Archive – was just… dropped into a – a *habitat* it was never adapted to survive in. It’s like a… like a non-native species, as far as this reality is concerned. Like taking a fish out of water and expecting it to evolve lungs on the spot.”

“Hm.” Basira cups her chin in one hand, running a thumb slowly over her lips as she thinks.

“I plan to ration myself as strictly as possible, of course. I just want to establish the possibility that things might – escalate, at some point.”

“If it comes to that, we can deal with it then,” Georgie says. “In the meantime, we should just…”

“Take things one crisis at a time?” Jon tries to temper his bitterness with a weak smile, without much success.

“I mean, yeah, basically,” Georgie says. “But in order for this to work, you need to be honest with us.”

“I – I am, I–”

“I’m not accusing you of lying, Jon. I just mean… well, you have a habit of ignoring your own limitations, and–”

“You’re not good at taking care of yourself,” Martin interjects. His cheeks go pink and he tosses an apologetic glance in Georgie’s direction. “S-sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“No worries,” Georgie says. Martin looks uncertain until she grins and, still making eye contact with him, jerks her chin in Jon’s direction. “By all means, go on.”

Emboldened, Martin turns his attention back to Jon, who meets his eyes with no small amount of apprehension. If Martin is intent on compiling a laundry list of examples of Jon's poor self-care – and judging from that worryingly familiar look on his face, *he is* – then he has ample material to choose from. Jon barely has time to brace himself before Martin launches into his lecture.

"You used to forget to eat. You never took lunch unless I hassled you. I had to nag you to go home at night." He's counting off on his fingers now, Jon notes with dismay. "You went through most days fueled by a maximum of four hours of sleep and frankly alarming amounts of caffeine. You insisted on coming back to work, *against* medical advice, immediately after *almost being eaten alive by worms.*"

Jon opens his mouth to speak – and promptly shuts it again when Martin gives him what Jon can (with equal amounts of affection and dread) only refer to as *that look.*

"You could barely walk. I had to threaten to forcibly remove you from the building before you agreed to go home. You spent the next several weeks sneaking – hell, *limping* around down here" – Martin makes a sweeping gesture with his arm – "where we found your predecessor's *murdered body,* and–"

"Yes, yes, okay," Jon interrupts, hands flapping anxiously. "I get your point."

"I also had to threaten to withhold the Admiral from you to get you to go have your burn treated," Georgie chimes back in. Jon glares at her; she looks *far* too entertained by the proceedings.

"I was – I was *on the lam,*" he protests. "I couldn't exactly go waltzing about in public."

"But you were perfectly willing to go chasing down Avatars, apparently."

"I…"

“Oh,” she adds, “and today was the first time you actually slept since you woke up from a coma.”

“I was asleep for six months,” Jon mutters, arms crossed, bouncing one heel against the floor. “I think that more than makes up for–”

“You tried to pass off a *stab wound* that required five – *five!”* – Martin holds up five fingers for added (and unnecessary, in Jon’s opinion) emphasis – “stitches as an accident with a – with a *bread knife.*”

Somehow, Martin manages to sound as indignant now as he did on the day it happened.

“That was several lifetimes ago,” Jon says primly. “At some point you have to let me live it down.”

“It hasn’t even been two years!”

“Seriously, Jon?” Daisy, who has been hiding a smirk behind her hand throughout the entire exchange, finally fails to contain her stifled laughter. “A *bread knife?”*

“I – I panicked,” Jon says weakly, cheeks burning. “Martin cornered me in the breakroom and it was the first thing I saw, and I just–”

Martin starts in again. “You were actively exsanguinating–”

“Th-that – that’s an exaggeration,” Jon sputters, watching Georgie out of the corner of his eye to gauge her reaction. She’s shaking her head with a faint smile, and Jon… well, Jon supposes that playful scorn is preferable to *actual* scorn.

“–*and* you refused to let me take you to the clinic until I threatened to call an ambulance,” Martin finishes.

“I was–” Jon twists a lock of hair around his fingers as he scrambles for some way to save face. “I would have been–”

“I think it’s safe to say you have no sense of self-preservation,” Basira says, and even *she* has a hint of amusement in her tone now.

“They have a point, Sims.”

“Et tu, Daisy?” Jon says, hoping to garner a laugh – or, failing that, at least halt the relentless bombardment of admonishments. Daisy simply raises her eyebrows and folds her arms, unmoved.

“Do I need to revisit some of the things we discussed in the Coffin?”

“No,” he says sullenly. When no one else speaks, he continues, somewhat irately: “Are we quite finished with the roast session?”

“For now,” Georgie says. “The point is, don’t run yourself into the ground just to test the limits of what you can endure.”

“And don’t let rationing statements turn into just another way to punish yourself,” Martin says sternly. Then he bites his lip, speaking gently now: “You… you deserve better than that.”

I really, really don’t, Jon thinks. Having no desire to unleash another lecture, though, he keeps the contrary comment to himself.

“Besides, letting yourself get that bad probably makes things worse in the long run,” Georgie says. “Like walking on a sprained ankle. Maybe you *can* endure the pain, but the longer you

ignore it, the more likely you are to cause even *more* damage, and recovery takes longer than it would have if you'd just attended to it in the first place."

"Speaking from personal experience, are we?" Jon allows a hint of retaliatory smugness slip into his voice.

"Yes," Georgie says, rolling her eyes. "That ankle is *still* weak. Which is why you should listen to me. Just… *try* to care about yourself even a fraction of how much others care about you, alright?

Jon sighs. "Point taken."

"You can trust us," Martin says.

"I – I know that. I *do* trust you. I'm just…" *Afraid.* "I don't want you to–"

"–mark me out as something other–"

"–getting used to people making polite excuses not to look at me–"

"–it wears you down to be someone whom nobody wants to see – I called out again and again but nobody came–"

Frantic, he covers his mouth with his hand to halt the recitation; the words continue to pour forth undeterred, albeit muffled and likely – *hopefully* – too indistinct for the others to understand.

"–I remember shouting, recriminations, and I was abandoned–"

"–no one to blame but my own stupid self – blundering in where I had no right to go–"

A flash flood of restless energy breaks through the dam and then it's racing through his veins, filling his mouth and his mind with white noise. He kicks one foot out and brings it stomping back down to the ground in a burst of sheer frustration and near-panic. A crawling sensation

travels up and down the length of his spine, a parade of feather-light pinpricks reminiscent of thousands of scuttling spider legs.

The slight whimper that works its way up his throat is thankfully stifled by the hand still pressed to his lips.

“Breathe through it,” Basira tells him.

Irritation flares to life at the reminder, but Jon forcibly snuffs it out before the spark can catch. Basira is only trying to help – and in a way she knows has helped before.

He breathes.

A frustrated noise – something between a snarl and a whine – spills out on his exhale, and he presses another hand atop the first as if it can render him entirely soundless. Before another wave of self-directed fury can take him, Jon coaxes himself to take another breath in through his nose. And another. And another, counting up until the pressure behind his eyes lets up and the static clears from his thoughts – at which point, he’s forced to confront the four pairs of eyes playing patient audience to his outburst.

Like a toddler’s tantrum, he thinks acidly, burning with humiliation.

“Sorry.” Although the scathing edge to the word is reserved solely for himself, he takes another breath before speaking again, lest the others assume the ire is directed at them. “Sorry. I’ll try to control it better.”

“It’s fine, Jon,” Martin says. “We know you aren’t doing it on purpose.”

“Anyway,” Basira says, her peremptory tone indicating a return to the subject at hand, “can we all agree that this is the best strategy for now?”

Jon looks down, tracing the weave of his scarf, focusing wholly on the texture of fabric against fingertips in a vain attempt to distract from the pins and needles still skittering across his skin. It takes a moment before he registers the silence. When he looks up, the others are staring at him. Basira raises an eyebrow, clearly waiting for his response.

"Even if I do agree to this," Jon says warily, "I still – I know it's a lot to ask, but I still need to be monitored for any signs of…" Although the question is meant for all of them, Jon shifts his gaze to make direct eye contact with Basira as he asks it. "Can you let me know, truthfully, if I – if it looks like I might… if you think I'm a danger?"

"Jon," Martin sighs, "you're not–"

"Yes," Basira says decisively.

Martin glares at her, his mouth falling open with a combination of shock and protective outrage. Jon recognizes *that* expression, and he jumps in before Martin can get a word out.

"Thank you, Basira."

Now Jon is the target of Martin's glower. He looks offended, betrayed almost, as if Jon took Basira's side in a dispute between the two of them. Again, though, Martin doesn't get the chance to scold.

"Alright then," Daisy says, stretching. "It's settled. You" – her eyes swivel to Jon, their piercing intensity prompting him to sit up at attention – "come to me when you're hungry."

"Before you cross the boundary into 'starving,'" Martin says, carving out an opportunity to chastise despite the interruption.

"Consider me a vending machine of horror stories," Daisy quips.

Jon grimaces and rubs the back of his neck. “Do you have to describe it that way?”

“Oh, quit grousing.” With a flash of teeth, a wolfish grin spreads across her face. “What, would you prefer I write up a menu?”

Her expression turns solemn when Jon winces and looks away.

“Sore nerve?” she asks, suddenly and uncharacteristically delicate.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?” The question is nearly inaudible, Jon’s eyes fixed on the floor.

“I wouldn’t have offered if I wasn’t.”

Fearing his voice might crack if he tries to speak, Jon bites down on his lip and tucks his chin to his chest, letting his hair fall to hide the others from view. He shuts his eyes for good measure and swallows hard, determined to head off the tears threatening to gather.

“Hey.” Daisy stretches out a leg and kicks his foot gently. It’s enough to make him raise his head cautiously. “I was just teasing. Really.”

“I–” It comes out as a croak. Jon clears his throat and blinks several times to dispel the stinging pressure in the corners of his eyes. “I know.”

“It is… so weird to see you two like this,” Basira says with an air of baffled wonder.

Jon notices Martin fidgeting out of the corner of his eye. When he looks directly at him, he sees Martin glaring at Daisy with a mixture of worry, suspicion, and resentment.

It isn't surprising; he never really did forgive Daisy for what she did to Jon. Neither did Jon, for that matter, but… Daisy was so changed after the Buried, it was difficult to see her as the same person who dragged him into the woods. She *was*, undoubtedly – she was the first to admit that – but she was remorseful and wholly dedicated to changing her behavior, even knowing it might well kill her. She never asked for forgiveness, never denied the harm she'd caused, never tried to justify or shirk responsibility for her actions.

When the Hunt reclaimed her, there was nothing left of the Daisy who he'd come to see as a friend. For that Daisy, it was a fate worse than death. Worse than the Coffin, even. She would have preferred to die as *herself,* and on her own terms – and the Hunt stole even that ounce of humanity from her. It made her forget that she didn't want to be a Hunter.

Jon dreads watching her waste away again, but not nearly as much as he fears the Hunt devouring her whole.

"People change," he says, looking from Martin to Basira, hoping those two words can convey all the things he cannot say. They both look unconvinced, albeit in slightly different ways.

The silence drags on uncomfortably long until Georgie claps her hands on her knees.

"You never actually answered the question, Jon. Are you alright taking statements from Daisy? At least until we can find a better solution?"

"I…"

He glances around the others in the circle, looking at each face in turn, trying to discern their opinions on the matter. Daisy gives him a reassuring nod. Martin has an almost pleading expression on his face, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth and wringing his hands in his lap.

Basira is… entirely inscrutable, much to Jon's dismay. He didn't expect otherwise, but he still wishes he could get a read on her, determine exactly how she categorizes him now. Probably not as a trustworthy ally. At best, perhaps she sees him as human enough to be suffered to

live, but on thin ice and under probation. At worst, she sees him as an irredeemable monster and is simply keeping her opinion to herself for the time being.

Or – no, the worst might be what he was to her last time. She saw him as a monster, yes, and was fully prepared to put him down – *like a rabid animal,* he thought when confronted with that wording – if he became too much of a danger. It *was* comforting to know that Basira wouldn't let sentiment get in the way if he had to be stopped. Less comforting was how she saw him as an asset: a dangerous tool to be used and then locked away once he'd fulfilled his purpose.

Granted, he gave Basira permission to use him – *asked* her to, in fact. It would be unfair to resent her for taking him up on an offer that he himself put on the table. If his powers could be used to *help* for once, he was fully willing to sacrifice his humanity to do so. After all, he was already too far gone, he figured – and everyone else seemed to agree. Georgie certainly seemed to think so. Melanie told him outright that he came back wrong. He had likewise interpreted Martin's avoidance as a comment on his having changed for the worst, at least initially. And he knew from the moment he woke up that Basira saw him as something *other,* as something more akin to the monsters they were fighting rather than an ally. He *understood* why they all felt that way, agreed with their assessments even, but it was soul-crushing nonetheless.

But even if he couldn't have – didn't deserve – trust or companionship, he still needed a *reason,* something to justify choosing not to die. If being wanted wasn't an option, the least he could do is avoid being a burden. If approval wasn't on the table, at least he could convince people that he was worth keeping around. And hadn't that approach always been second nature to him? In a way, he didn't tend to seek affection so much as try to avoid rejection.

Ultimately, pursuing that strategy started to feel sickeningly *familiar.* It wasn't until much later that he realized why: between Jonah and the Beholding – and in all likelihood the Web as well – he'd grown accustomed to being seen as a means to an end, and that made it all the more difficult to see himself as a *who* rather than as a *what.* It's a distinction he still struggles with – particularly during those times when the Archive makes its presence known.

He might not have much right to ask for trust or approval, but that doesn't change the fact that he craves it – perhaps from Basira most of all. If even *her* opinion of him can change… well, it would go a long way in helping him to believe that he really does have a chance.

“Jon,” Basira says, snapping him back to attention.

Shit. How long has he been staring?

“We need an answer,” she continues.

Jon can’t help but wonder if this is another test. If he agrees, will she see it as further proof of his inhumanity, as evidence that he isn’t trying to resist? If he refuses, will it make her suspicious, lead her to believe he plans on going hunting instead? He’s never been skilled at reading between the lines, at interpreting social cues, at deconstructing the unspoken. The best he can do is ask questions and guess blindly as to the *right* way to respond – and agonize over the repercussions should he get it wrong. Basira has a way of making that already difficult process even more intimidating.

“Jon,” Basira repeats herself, growing impatient now.

“O-okay,” he says quietly. “It’s… worth a try, I suppose.”

She gives a curt nod. As always, it gives him no insight into her thoughts. He has no time to resume brooding, however, as Martin draws his attention with an audible sigh of relief. When Jon glances at him, Martin graces him with a smile – small, almost shy, but genuine. Jon tries and fails to mirror it.

Apparently finished with Jon for the moment, Basira turns her attention to Daisy.

“Come on,” she says, rising to her feet and tapping Daisy on the shoulder. “We should stretch your legs.”

Obediently, Daisy starts to stand, only for her knees to buckle beneath her. Basira is there to catch her.

“Been sitting too long,” Daisy grunts, embarrassment coloring her cheeks.

“Can you manage the ladder?” Daisy shakes her head, flushing darker. “That’s fine,” Basira says, though Jon thinks he can detect a hint of fear – maybe even melancholy – in her tone now. “Let’s just… walk for now. Wake your legs up.”

The two of them start off down the tunnel, Basira supporting half of Daisy’s weight as she staggers forward.

“Jon?” Georgie says softly.

“Hm.”

“Try to cut yourself some slack, yeah?”

Jon really can’t afford to do that, but saying so will only start them talking in circles again. Martin leans closer and places a hand on Jon’s knee.

“Hey,” he says, looking Jon in the eye with overwhelming sincerity. “We’ve got this, alright?”

“Alright,” Jon responds, and wills himself to believe it.

The three of them exit the tunnel in silence. It isn’t until Jon hoists himself through the trapdoor – Martin assisting in pulling him to his feet – that one of them speaks.

“Oh,” Georgie says, looking at Jon, “by the way…”

“Yes?” Jon says, apprehensive.

“Melanie asked me to tell you that she’s ready to talk, whenever you are.”

“O-oh.”

“I know it's not a great time–”

“No, I – I think I…” Jon nods. “I think I’m ready, too.”

“It doesn’t have to be tonight,” Georgie says hurriedly.

“I really am okay to–”

Martin looks ready to object, but Georgie gets there first.

“Okay, correction: it *won’t* be tonight,” she interrupts, fixing him with a stern look now. “You’ve had hardly any rest since coming out of the Coffin. I think you should get some actual sleep tonight. If – *if* – you’re feeling up to it tomorrow, we can arrange something then.”

“Fine,” Jon sighs. He knows better than to argue with the combined tenacity of Georgie *and* Martin.

And he has to admit, he *is* rather tired.

A little over a half-hour later, Martin and Jon are back in Document Storage.

When he suggests Jon go to bed, Martin is prepared for a protracted argument. Jon acquiesces surprisingly quickly, though, his only condition being that Martin get some sleep as well. It takes slightly longer to convince Jon to take the cot. Martin pulls up a chair and sits at the bedside, refusing to budge as Jon makes his counterarguments. Eventually, though, Jon starts nodding off mid-protest. It's only a matter of time before he begrudgingly gives in – but not before demanding that Martin take the better blanket. With an amused shake of his head, Martin agrees to the compromise.

Jon slips between the sheets, Martin leans back in his chair, and for a long moment the two of them watch each other in silence. Jon's hand rests near the pillow, fingers crooked loosely, palm turned up like an invitation. Martin has the sudden urge to reach out and take it.

Another minute passes before Martin realizes that… well, that's a thing he can do now, isn't it? What's stopping him?

Slowly, tentatively, he extends his hand and lets it hover above Jon's, fingertips barely brushing. He applies the slightest pressure, giving Jon every opportunity to pull back. He doesn't. Jon interlocks their fingers, curling them over in a firm grasp, and peers up at Martin through his lashes with mingled uncertainty and hope.

"Is this okay?" Martin asks quietly.

As an answer, Jon lets out a contented sigh, eyelids fluttering closed as a sleepy smile spreads across his face.

"'Course," he mumbles, already drifting off. "Always is."

Martin will follow not long after, slumping precariously to the side, head lolling onto his shoulder, and hand still held fast in a warm, sure grip. It's a posture that will undoubtedly leave him sore by the time he wakes up, but that discomfort will be overshadowed by the way he feels in these shared, quiet moments: seen, accepted, wanted, embraced.

Anchored, he thinks – and for the first time in months, no thoughts of Loneliness shadow him as he falls to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Jon: *feels safe for the first time in a literally immeasurable amount of time and promptly passes right back tf out*
Martin: oh no he's cute

_____

- Jon's gotten a SNACK and a NAP now. I hope you're all happy. :P (Just kidding. Every time someone tells me to let Jon have a nap, I am also @ing myself - and Jonny Sims - with the exact same demand.)

- (On that note, I find it funny that as I was writing this chapter and finally giving Jon the nap he deserves, he was ALSO finally getting the nap he deserves in canon.)

- Citations for Jon's Archive-speak are as follows: MAG 135; 130/067/066; 032/037.

- Next chapter: Melanie gets some actual screentime again!!

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

Reconciliation

Chapter Summary

In which Martin considers where to go from here, and Jon and Melanie talk it all out, all under the supervision of one Georgie Barker.

Chapter Notes

So! Heads up: this chapter is mostly heart-to-heart conversations & introspection. I may or may not have gotten carried away with the soft existentialism. ANYWAYS

CWs for Chapter 18: discussion of passive suicidal ideation; unintentional self-harm (scratching at arms as a stim, to the point of drawing blood); brief allusion to childhood neglect; internalized ableism (re: ADHD, but not explicitly stated as such); brief acephobia (past experience & internalized); Jon-typical negative self-talk, guilt, & rejection sensitive dysphoria; discussion of past trauma (including having bodily autonomy overridden, canon non-consensual surgery, & stabbing); internalized victim blaming/comparing victim to their abuser; discussion of self-inflicted blinding/eye gouging (past attempts & potential future attempts); brief mention of Mr. Spider/arachnophobia themes; swears.

(Let me know if I missed anything.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once Jon opened the door and the Fears rewrote reality, not only was sleep no longer a physiological necessity – it was no longer an *option.* Much like the Coffin, even a temporary escape via unconsciousness was contrary to a world defined by the ceaseless generation of terror. And just as it did any human in that place, perpetual wakefulness took its toll on Jon's already ravaged mental health.

The fact that he was no longer plaguing the nightmares of his victims may have been a small consolation, if not for the fact that he was instead witnessing the *waking* nightmares of billions of new victims: the same scenes looping over and over, layered one on top of the other, an endless soundtrack screaming in the background of his mind. Venting a statement from time to time could only do so much to quell that storm. He'd really had no choice *but* to learn to compartmentalize on autopilot and dissociate on command.

So when, for the first time since before the world ended, Jon awakens to Martin at his side, his mind cannot immediately reconcile the sight. He might think he was dreaming, except that he hasn't had a pleasant dream of his own since he became the Archivist. And even before then – well, he's always been more predisposed to nightmares.

Jon feels his heart stutter in his throat when he sets eyes on Martin. Their hands are still clasped together, and despite the sweatiness of their palms and the way Jon's arm is cramping from the angle, he has no desire to let go. Instead, he lies still, breathing shallow and measured, fearful of any sound or movement that might shatter the uncanny peace of the moment.

He really shouldn't be staring like this, though, should he? Martin has given him permission to stare many times before, but that was in a future where they had seen each other at their most vulnerable. Being seen, truly *seen* – as terrifying as it was for the both of them – became a comfort, because of what they had been through together. Here in the past, Martin hasn't shared that experience. He might not be as keen to put up with Jon's incessant *watching.*

Those reservations still aren't enough to stop him.

Martin is still sat in his chair, but bent sideways at the waist to lean halfway on the cot. He's snoring lightly, his head pillowed on his free arm, glasses askew. The angle is probably hell on his back.

Maybe I should wake him up, Jon thinks idly, one corner of his mouth turning up in a small, fond smile.

He doesn't. Instead, his eyes remain rapt on Martin, soaking in every detail, as beloved and familiar as always: the length of his eyelashes, the shape of his lips, the spray of freckles across his nose, that particularly stubborn cowlick that always, *always* stands on end. Jon wants to reach out, sink his fingers into those curls, massage his scalp in that way Martin used to love – but that would be a step beyond staring, wouldn't it? So he watches: unblinking, aching, adoring, and so overwhelmed that he's at risk of tearing up.

It's painfully, *embarrassingly* maudlin of him, he knows, but can he really be faulted for that? Jon surpassed the lifespan of a normal human several times over, bereft and alone in a desolated realm of his own making. He spent much of that time out of his mind with grief, drowning in hopelessness and guilt, cycling between numb dissociation and raw destruction. When he wasn't wandering aimlessly – near-catatonic, subsumed by the never-ending deluge of fear permeating that world – he was lashing out. Although he couldn't die, he could still *hurt,* and so he did, with exacting focus: both himself and all the other monsters going through the motions in that doomed world.

Ending them neither decreased nor increased the net output of fear, but it was the closest Jon could come to some nebulous, fleeting sense of justice. He didn't enjoy it – in fact, he *hated* the other Avatars sometimes, bitter that they could attain a release that seemed impossible for him. His first few acts of vengeance in those early days had felt good in the moment, but the high never lasted: just like taking a statement.

Eventually, once the fear began to grow scarcer, it felt more and more like granting mercy – often to monsters who never showed any themselves – rather than meting out justice. A few moments of pain was preferable to slow, torturous starvation. Breekon was the first to request such a favor. He was far from the last.

It made Jon feel monstrous in an all new way, offering escape to predators when he could do nothing to save their victims – at least not without turning them into Avatars themselves, creating more monsters to replace the old. But it also made him feel *real* – a tangible presence interacting with the world, as opposed to a ghost, unseen and unknowable. An undeniable consequence, rather than a detached observer.

Tears start to gather in the corners of his eyes. Jon tries to swallow them back, but his throat has grown thick with emotion. He never expected to escape that place; never expected to see a friendly face or hear a kind word ever again. And now that he has…

This isn't for you, says an insidious little voice in the back of his head: some twisted chimera comprised of all those who have known him well enough to see him for what he is, to catalogue his failings, to pass judgment. *There is no place for you in this world. You don't* ***belong*** *here. You were made for something greater; eliminate that, and what remains–*

A gentle knock-knock at the door startles him out of his thoughts.

“Jon?” Georgie pushes the door open and peers through the gap. “You awake?”

“Yeah.” It comes out as a fractured whisper. He sniffles and rubs his eyes, but Georgie has already noticed his distress.

“Bad dream?”

“No.” Jon clears his throat and props himself up on one elbow. “No, ah – quite the opposite, really.”

“Oh?” Georgie says, probing for an explanation.

Jon's gaze drifts to his hand, still joined with Martin’s. “None of this feels real, and…”

“And?”

“I, uh…” Jon closes his eyes, blinking back tears. “I don’t deserve it.”

“The world doesn’t work that way.”

“Maybe it should.” Jon lets out a wet, clipped laugh.

No one got what they deserved in the world he created, only what hurt them the most. Tempting as it was to find some meaning in it all, to retroactively draw correlations between past actions and current circumstances, Jon Knew from the very beginning that there was no cause-and-effect at play. Not really. Any misery being experienced in that new world was utterly unrelated to the lives people lived before the change. It was indiscriminate. Everyone was afraid and in agony, regardless of any subjective judgment on whether or not they deserved it.

And nothing Jon did changed those material conditions in the slightest. He could shift an individual's role from subject to object and vice versa, reassign their place on the spectrum of the tortured versus the torturer, but at the end of the day, he was still just facilitating fear, regardless of what shape it took. Despite being one of the most powerful and fearful things roaming that scorched earth, his options were as limited as they'd always been. Every choice led to more or less the same end.

By every measure that could be said to actually *matter,* he was ultimately powerless.

Would it have been any more tolerable if the suffering was more proportionate? If at least some of the people trapped in the domains could be said to be receiving just punishment for any agony they themselves had inflicted before the end of the world? Maybe. But probably not. Securing vengeance never actually yielded any meaningful catharsis for Jon. Even Jonah Magnus' ultimate fate produced nothing but revulsion. The Archive may feed on such fear, but after all this time, Jon – all the pieces of him that still belong to *him* – has no desire to behold suffering. He has seen enough for several lifetimes, and he was never once given the option to look away, let alone put an end to it.

Jon shakes his head and begins to fully sit up, slowly and carefully so as not to disturb Martin. He's hardly expecting Georgie to engage with his newest avenue of brooding, but after a minute, she gives a thoughtful hum and leans against the doorframe.

"Don't know that I want to see what that would look like," she says pensively.

"What?"

"A world where 'deservedness' was quantifiable – where you could put a precise value on suffering, and every action had a moral price tag on it that stayed the same regardless of the circumstances. Where subjective experiences could be – shoved into neat little categories that everyone could agree on."

"Like Robert Smirke," Jon murmurs.

“Sure.” Georgie shrugs. “I don’t know if humanity as we know it could even *exist* in a world like that. We’d be… unrecognizable.”

“O-oh?”

“Mm. We aren’t equations. Or – well, we are, I guess, at the most basic physical level, if you scale down small enough. Atoms, physics, chemical reactions and all that. But when it comes to the *experience* of consciousness, personal identity, free will… isn’t the complexity what gives it all meaning? If we could account for every last variable, know the exact effect of every cause, what would that make us?”

“I… I don’t know.”

“Life isn’t about the destination, I guess is what I’m saying.” Georgie runs her thumb over her lips as she muses. “We already *know* the destination. One way or another, everything dies.”

“‘The moment that you die will feel exactly the same as this one,’” Jon recites, a distant quality to his voice. *“There’s no difference between that last moment that ushers us out into oblivion and the one we experience now – everything ends, even the universe, even time. And… that means it has always already ended.”*

It takes a moment for Jon to come back to himself, blinking dazedly. It's another few seconds before he realizes what happened – and when he does, a sudden, heavy coldness takes root and blossoms in his chest.

“I’m so– I didn’t – I wasn’t–”

“It’s – fine,” Georgie says, although she sounds a bit rattled. “It was an accident.”

“Still, I’m sorry, I–”

“Apology accepted, Jon. I’m not angry.” When she sees Jon gearing up to belabor the point, she holds up a hand. “You’re forgiven. Let’s just move on, okay?”

Jon bites down on his lower lip, torn between dueling impulses: groveling, berating himself, shutting down, or… simply taking Georgie at her word. With a long, shaky exhale, he settles on trust: Georgie expressed a desire to drop it and move forward. He should respect that, right? *Right.*

He bites back his protests and nods stiffly. “Okay.”

“Look, what I was trying to get at is – knowing the destination doesn’t invalidate the journey, right? If anything, the inevitability of an ending is what gives meaning to all the rest.”

The End forced Georgie to confront the insignificance of her own birth and death against the backdrop of a vast universe – but rather than allow that realization to immobilize her with despair, she opted to make all the moments in between meaningful. Jon can't help but once again remember the confidence with which Martin countered Simon Fairchild's brand of flippant nihilism: *I think our experience of the universe has value, even if it disappears forever.*

I might have a type, he thinks to himself, equal parts wry and endeared.

“We all end up in the same place,” Georgie continues, “but that doesn’t have to mean we all follow the same path. What matters is what happens along the way, and – if you could map out every bit of the journey, predict the outcome of every single step you take, then – what else is left?”

“If you already know the answer to every question,” Jon says softly, “what’s the point of *being?”*

Jon isn’t sure what expression he’s making, but whatever it is, Georgie blanches when she catches his eye.

“Oh, I – Jon, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean–”

“No, it’s – it’s alright. You’re not wrong.” Jon chuckles awkwardly. “Is it odd that I find the thought…reassuring? Sort of?”

“We’re getting lost in the weeds, aren't we?” Georgie says with a flustered laugh. “My original point was – this obsession you have with deservedness, and establishing dichotomies, and trying to find simple, objective answers to complicated questions – it’s a skewed way of looking at the world, and it’s eating you alive. You *have* to stop treating your life like it’s a scorecard. Relentlessly punishing yourself isn’t going to change the past. It’s not healthy, it’s not productive, and it just makes you more likely to sabotage your future.”

“I know. It’s just… the things I’ve done, they’re – unforgivable. I can’t leave it behind, and I can’t take it back.”

Jon used to wonder when the Eye would make him too monstrous to feel shame. It never did, never had to: he abetted it regardless of how he felt about it. For the most part, he can’t even apologize: the people he hurt are either dead or have no memory of what Jon did to warrant it. Besides, some consequences too irrevocable, too catastrophic to cushion with remorse.

Sorry that you died because I failed; sorry that I burned a bridge that could have kept us both safe; sorry that you’re trapped here just because I stood too close to you. Sorry for the invaded privacy, sorry for the mistreatment, sorry for all the hunger and fear and nightmares. Sincerest apologies, everyone, for the eternal torment.

He could have composed a personalized apology for every last person in the world had he wanted – he’d certainly had the time to spare, as well as detailed knowledge of each victim’s plight. But any apology he could possibly make, no matter how eloquent or sincere, would have been insulting in its inadequacy. What reparations can be made to soften the blow of a life lost or a world ended?

“S-so,” he says, eyes downcast, “that just leaves… guilt.”

And fear. Fear enough to cram an Archive full to bursting.

"I know," Georgie says.

"I'm sorry, I–" Jon breathes a bitter laugh. "I'm a broken record, aren't I? I fall apart every time I see you."

"Jon," George sighs, "you don't have to apologize. You've been through unimaginable trauma. You've had barely any chance to start to heal from it. You're *still living it.* I don't expect a few heart-to-heart conversations to close the book on… all of that."

"Still, it's – annoying, I imagine." Jon picks at a loose thread on his trouser leg. "To sit through the same conversation over and over again."

"I'd be more worried if you went back to just – pretending to be okay, refusing to talk about it. It's been barely a month since you got out of the hospital. Shit, it hasn't even been twenty-four hours since you crawled out of that Coffin." Her eyes narrow slightly, intent and searching. "Speaking of which, I should ask: Are you a danger to yourself right now?"

"What?" The question catches Jon off guard. "No? N-no, I'm – why would you–"

"Just checking in. Which I'm going to keep doing. Regularly. So you may as well make peace with that now."

"It's not like I'm going to kill myself," Jon mumbles – aiming for *casually unconcerned* and instead landing squarely in *transparently uncomfortable* territory. "I'm fairly certain I can't die a mundane human death, anyway."

"Maybe not, but that doesn't mean you can't still hurt yourself. And being suicidal sucks regardless of whether you actually plan on going through with it." Jon studiously avoids eye contact as Georgie speaks. "Anyway, I know *I* sound like a broken record, but I'll say it as many times as you need reminding: You have a second chance. You said you were going to

make the best of it, and you can't do that if you won't *let* yourself have some peace." Her expression softens, as does her voice. "Just… let yourself be, won't you?"

There's truth to what Georgie is saying. Even if he *wasn't* mired in guilt, though…

"I'm *afraid*," Jon whispers. "Of losing him, of losing everyone, of…"

Of *dooming* everyone. It was so easy. All it took was his voice, an incantation, and this ceaseless, aberrant *hunger*. He's seen the consequences of the destiny for which he has unwittingly been prepared. Like it or not, he is the most dangerous thing in this world – a walking hair-trigger, already having overstayed his welcome on this earth by several lifetimes. One misstep, and…

"I should be grateful to have this, to have *him* – and I *am,* but every – every time I come close to letting myself feel – safe, hopeful, content, it… it never lasts. It's always swallowed up by fear – not of *if* something goes wrong, but *when.* It just feels like… any choice I make is bound to end in tragedy. Like there's no way out. Like nothing I do will change anything. I – I'll mess it up; I always do."

It's a pattern that began long before he became entangled in Jonah's machinations. Jon was a difficult child who grew into an even more difficult adult, always saying and doing all the wrong things because he's never been able to fully grasp the invisible rules that other people seem to navigate so naturally. At home he could never shake the feeling that he was an odd guest, secretly unwelcome but with nowhere else to keep him; at school he was a menace, asking all the wrong questions at all the wrong times and prone to following his own lesson plans whenever the curriculum failed to hold his interest. Peer relationships typically failed to take root: he's too guarded, too abrasive, too annoying and tactless and awkward. Whatever friendships managed to blossom tended to wilt before long, for all the same reasons.

Romantic relationships have historically been even more fraught. There are expectations that he will never meet, forms of intimacy that are traditionally assumed to be *required* rather than *optional* for such a relationship to qualify as normal, healthy, and sustainable. In his experience, setting those boundaries has usually been a deal-breaker. Georgie was the first to accept that aspect of him unconditionally; Martin was the second – and although Jon no longer believes that it's a problem to be fixed, those old, long-held insecurities still rear up from time to time.

He had hoped he could at least prove himself capable as a Head Archivist, but, well… he was inexperienced with the duties of a mundane archiving job, unsuited to managing a department, and his preexisting difficulties with establishing rapport were exacerbated by his need to maintain a professional boundary between himself and his assistants. He tried to make up for those shortcomings with effort and dedication and – in retrospect – frankly obscene levels of overwork, but he never did manage to be a good boss or a good coworker.

It's a cruel joke that of all the roles to finally excel in, it's as the Archivist – or, specifically, *Jonah's* Archivist. He met every expectation, even – perhaps especially – when he didn't know what those expectations were. Not like Gertrude. She would doubtless be disappointed by her successor: constantly second-guessing himself, resolving indecisiveness with impulsivity, stumbling around in the dark, pointlessly sabotaging himself and those unlucky enough to find themselves in his orbit – ultimately devastating a world that she had made so many ruthless sacrifices to protect.

Jon has spent most of his life fumbling at being a peer, a friend, a partner, a colleague, an ally. If he couldn't manage to figure it out when he was still human, how is he supposed to play at being a person *now,* when he's…

"This – this isn't *for* things like me," Jon says hoarsely. He can feel more tears teeming as he looks down at Martin: kind and good and so, so deserving of happiness, of security, of a peaceful life that Jon fears he will never be able to provide, no matter how fiercely he loves. "I don't get to" – *end the world* – "to become – *this,* and still get a happy ending."

"Do you *Know* that?" Georgie asks.

"N-no, I can't predict the future, but–"

"Then you shouldn't assume the worst. You don't have a fixed destiny, no matter what you've been led to believe." She scowls at him. "And stop referring to yourself as a 'thing'. It really doesn't matter how human you are or aren't, you're still *you*. You're still a person."

Jon doesn't know how to respond to that without either contradicting her or offering lukewarm, disingenuous agreement. Luckily, he doesn't have to: Martin begins to stir, and

Jon hurriedly wipes away any evidence of tears, fighting to regain his composure. With a snuffle and a sleepy groan, Martin opens his eyes, blinking blearily.

“Hey there,” Jon says with a soft smile.

Martin returns a vague grin, muzzy with sleep. With unfocused eyes, he appears to slowly take in his surroundings, gaze lingering briefly on and then skating over his hand, fingers still interlocked with Jon’s. When his attention drifts towards Georgie, he stares at her for a long few seconds, squinting at the influx of light from the hallway. Another slow blink, another extended stare at his and Jon’s linked hands, and then his eyes widen. Color blooms on his cheeks as he abruptly surfaces into full consciousness, glasses tumbling off his face as he jerks upward.

“Oh, god, I’m sorry,” he says, groggy voice at odds with the panicked embarrassment in his eyes. He pulls his hand back, mumbling apologies about clammy palms. As he straightens in his seat, he lets out a pained hiss.

Jon cringes sympathetically. “You should’ve taken the cot.”

Martin ignores the comment, scrubbing at his face now, hiding it in his sleeve. It does nothing to conceal his reddened ears, Jon notes with amused affection.

“Did you sleep alright, otherwise?” Jon asks.

“Mm?” Martin retrieves his glasses and slips them back on before turning his attention to Jon. “Oh, uh – yes. You?”

“Yes, actually.”

His first routine breakdown of the day notwithstanding, Jon did manage to sleep through most of the night, only waking once after a brief foray back into Karolina’s nightmare.

The rest of the dreams were relatively benign. He spent some time with Georgie. Naomi was pleased to see him and eager as ever to regale him with cat anecdotes. Dr. Elliott was less pleased, but he was at least no more afraid of Jon than he had been during the coma. Seeing Jordan Kennedy was as uncomfortable as ever; Jon doubts he'll ever know what to say to him. Tessa was more difficult to read. She wasn't exactly happy to see him again, but she didn't seem angry, either.

Should've known it wouldn't last, she'd sighed to herself – and then promptly changed the subject before Jon could stammer out an apology.

"Learned a lot about the right to repair movement," Jon says absently.

"What?" Martin asks, bewildered.

"Oh, uh – Tessa Winters. Gave a statement in 2016 about a haunted chatbot. It forced her to watch a seventeen-hour-long video of a man eating his computer."

Georgie perks up at that.

"Oh, is that the, uh – that creepypasta about that guy who mutilated himself trying to upload his mind to his computer?"

"Sergey Ushanka."

"Yeah! Something about how he tried to crack open his skull and wire his brain to the motherboard?"

"That is one variation of the story, yes."

“What,” Martin says flatly.

“I was thinking about doing a *What the Ghost* episode on that one,” Georgie explains, her sheepish smile doing little to conceal her lingering enthusiasm. “Haunted technology is always a popular topic. Didn’t expect that one to be *real,* though. I wonder–”

Jon answers her question before she can ask it: “I doubt Tessa would be interested in being a guest on the show.”

“Yeah,” Georgie sighs, “I guess not.”

Martin lets out a nervous chuckle. “What, uh – sorry, what does any of this have to do with right to repair?”

“Oh. Right. Tessa’s one of the people whose nightmares I… invade. Perpetuate, I suppose. She’s, ah, not my biggest fan, considering what I’ve put her through, but she says I’m a decent audience.” Martin gives Jon a blank look. “She basically gives me free lectures sometimes? Technology-related subjects, mostly. Fascinating stuff.”

“God, you sound like a grandpa,” Georgie says.

“Yes, yes, Tessa tells me the same.” Jon rolls his eyes. “Anyway, she has some, ah… strong feelings about Apple. Among other things.”

“Right,” Martin says slowly. “Wait, back up – you know what creepypasta is?”

“Yes, Martin,” Jon says with a sigh and an indulgent smile, “I know what creepypasta is.”

“That particular internet rabbit hole was one of his many, *many* avenues of procrastination in uni, believe it or not,” Georgie says.

“Contrary to popular belief, I’m not a Luddite. I *tried* to introduce the Archives to the twenty-first century, remember? It’s not my fault the Beholding has a retro aesthetic.”

“Huh,” Martin says with a bemused smile. Then he yawns. “Sorry. What time is it?”

As soon as the question is posed, the Beholding drops the knowledge into Jon’s head.

“About half ten,” Georgie answers, just as Jon says, “10:28 and forty-six seconds” – and then, wincing at his own pedantry, “Sorry.”

Georgie looks ready to let loose with a snarky reply, but before she can say anything, Martin is on his feet, the blanket on his lap sliding to the floor.

“Ten–? Jon, why didn’t you wake me up?”

“I – I wasn’t really paying attention to the time, I haven’t actually been awake for…”

Jon trails off as the Beholding casually notifies him that he woke up thirty-seven minutes and twenty-three seconds ago. He can feel heat pooling in his cheeks as a vague sense of shame sets in. Good lord, was he really just *watching Martin sleep* for *that long?*

“I should have been upstairs over an hour ago,” Martin says, frantically scanning the room for–

For his shoes, the Eye informs Jon.

Do you ever mind your goddamn business? Jon shoots back. On impulse, he swats at the air to his side, momentarily forgetting that the ever-present eldritch tagalongs he’d grown accustomed to during the apocalypse are no longer with him. In his dreams, he’d come eye-

to-eye with them again for the first time since waking up in the hospital; apparently, that's all it took to reintroduce this old, reflexive shooing tic to his waking life.

Georgie raises her eyebrows at the gesture, but Martin appears not to notice, preoccupied with his escalating panic.

Jon scrambles for some way to soothe him, but he's at a loss. In his future, through trial and error and intense observation, he had painstakingly learned how to comfort Martin. Now, though, after so much time spent alone, Jon is out of practice. Moreover, he's always been more adept at offering comfort through action and touch rather than *words* – and right now, he's still uncertain where Martin's boundaries lie.

So Jon continues to sit there, hands fluttering slightly as his mind rifles through a mountain of inane clichés in search of something, *anything* that might be able to help. Meanwhile, the Archivist in him is distracted by Martin's growing anxiety. It isn't the same as *abject fear,* per se, but it's similar enough to pique the Eye's interest.

Once again, Jon takes a swipe at the empty space beside him – and again ignores Georgie's amused expression.

"If Peter notices I'm not in the office…" Martin nearly trips over the blanket on the floor as he turns in place to search behind him. "He – he'll be suspicious–"

That's when Georgie decides to speak up. *Thank god,* Jon thinks to himself. She exudes far more confidence than he does in this sort of situation.

"Won't he already be suspicious?" she says, calm as can be. It's enough to bring Martin's fretting to a pause. "It's not like you can keep this a secret forever, right? Your change in attitude is… pretty noticeable, Martin."

"I – I – I didn't really think much further ahead than–" Martin laughs nervously. "I was just – playing along, and it *felt* right, like if I just kept following the path I'd reach a – a – a conclusion? I don't know *what,* but…" His shoulders slump, leaving his arms hanging awkwardly at his sides; he tugs at the hem of his shirt, as if he doesn't know what to do with

his hands. “I don’t think I cared much? I figured I could just – gather information and pass it along, and if nothing else I could keep Peter’s attention away from the Archives, and… that was the whole plan, to just keep doing that until… until whatever was going to happen *happened,* I guess, and now I don’t – I don’t know where to go from here, and…”

“Martin?” Jon says softly.

“Huh?” Martin finally glances up to meet Jon’s eyes.

“Can I take your hand?”

Cautiously, wordlessly, Martin offers his hand. Jon takes it in his, lacing their fingers together loosely.

“It’ll be alright,” he says. “You don’t have to figure it out on your own. Not anymore.”

Martin’s lips move minutely for a few seconds before meekly saying, “That doesn’t *feel* right.”

“I know.”

“I’m – I’m not saying you’re *lying,*” Martin says, rushed and anxious to appease, “it’s just…”

“Hearing something isn’t the same as accepting it. Or trusting it.”

“I *do* trust you, I do, it’s just… I don’t know. It’s like I can’t wrap my mind around it.”

“It’s alright,” Jon says gently. “I understand.”

“I’m sorry,” Martin whispers, his voice steeped in guilt.

“You don’t need to apologize.” When Martin opens his mouth to protest, Jon reiterates: “You have nothing to be sorry for. I promise.”

“Okay,” Martin says after a pause, still sounding somewhat doubtful. Then he grimaces. “I, uh, still don’t know what to do about Peter, though.”

“That depends on what you want,” Jon says, squeezing Martin’s hand. “I trust you. I’ll follow your lead.”

“O-okay,” Martin repeats. He blinks several times, surprised, before giving a nervous chuckle. “Only… I, uh, don’t really know what I want, to be honest?”

“Break it down into smaller pieces,” Georgie says. Martin flinches slightly – he must have momentarily forgotten she was in the room. “Do you want to go back to the Lonely?”

There’s only a short delay before Martin says, “No. I don’t… it feels different than before. Doesn’t *fit* right.”

“Do you want to continue working with Peter?”

“I don’t know,” Martin says slowly. “Not really? I mean, I never *wanted* to in the first place, it just… seemed like the thing to do.”

“Okay, rephrase,” Georgie says. “Do you want to *stop* working with him now?”

“I think so.” Another pause. Martin’s brow wrinkles as he stares at the floor in thought before glancing back up at Georgie. “Yeah, I – I think I do.”

“But…?” Georgie prompts, sensing Martin’s uncertainty.

“I worry about how he might react. He’ll probably start paying more attention to the Archives, and…” Martin looks at Jon. “What if he takes it out on you? Or – I mean, I don’t want him to hurt *anyone*, but I…” He looks down at their joined hands, tightening his grip just slightly. “I think you would be his most likely target.”

“Maybe,” Jon admits. He’s witnessed firsthand how vindictive Peter can be. “But I would rather take that risk than have you torture yourself on the off chance he’ll let me be. And… I think we’ll all be safer if we cooperate as a group rather than stay divided.”

“I guess. I’m not sure how to go about it, though.”

“Well,” Georgie says thoughtfully, “it depends on whether you want to quit all at once or ease into it.”

“I don’t know.” Martin looks to Jon again. “If I continue to work for him in some capacity, would it give us an advantage?”

At this point, they know more about the Extinction than Peter does, and Jon has a decent grasp on Peter’s goals and how he operates. So…

“I… don’t think there’s anything to be gained if you keep working closely with him, no,” Jon replies. “And anyway, I – I would rather that not be the deciding factor? It’s your decision, of course, it’s just – your wellbeing is more important.”

“Hypocrite,” Martin mutters, but there’s a tinge of endearment there.

“I know,” Jon sighs. “I’m working on it. But to the point, I worry that working closely with him might drag you back into the Lonely.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m also worried about you confronting him directly to resign. Especially on your own.”

Peter is patient. Moreover, he *enjoys* a long game. If he sees Martin’s change of heart as a surmountable obstacle, Peter is likely to take a step back and wait for another opening to regain the upper hand. If, on the other hand, he decides that Martin is a lost cause… well, Peter is a sore loser. There’s every chance that he could drop Martin into the Lonely out of spite.

“Either way,” Jon says, “I don’t think it’s safe for you to be alone with him. Sooner or later, he’ll realize that the Lonely’s starting to lose its hold on you.”

Unthinkingly, Jon tightens his grip on Martin’s hand.

“It’s been slipping for a while now,” Martin says quietly. “I think he’s already noticed.”

“In that case… there’s no telling how he’ll react if he decides your allegiance to the Lonely is too tenuous to salvage.”

“Do you – or…” Georgie appears to grapple with wording for a few seconds. “Can you *Know* what Peter knows?”

“No,” Jon says. The last time he tried to Know something about Peter, not only did it yield nothing of value, it nearly incapacitated Jon – and he didn’t recover until he gave in and fed on a new victim. He can’t afford to repeat the experience. Daisy’s supply of statements is finite; Jon needs to ration them as much as possible. “I do know that Peter can’t spy from a distance, but that doesn’t mean he can’t just turn invisible to eavesdrop. Or that Elias won’t feed him information.”

“Let’s focus on the immediate question, then,” Georgie says. “Do you want to go upstairs and walk into your office two hours late with bedhead” – Martin runs a self-conscious hand through his hair, eliciting an affectionate smile from Jon – “or do you want to no-call/no-show?”

“Well… Peter isn’t actually around much,” Martin says. “Sometimes days go by before he checks in. He might not realize I’m not in my office yet. Maybe I can just – go about my normal routine for now?” He glances at Jon, almost beseeching. “At least until I have an idea of how much he knows?”

Like everyone who has worked in the Archives, Martin has developed a harder edge over the years. Early in his tenure, he seemed unassuming on first impression. He was by no means a pushover, but he *was* eager to please and preferred to avoid unnecessary confrontation. It made him an all-too-easy target for Jon’s insecurity-fueled ire.

But rather than roll over in the face of criticism, Martin has always been determined to prove his detractors wrong. Whether it’s risking his life for the sake of *doing his due diligence* – Jon cringes at the memory – or stubbornly caring for people who deemed him incompetent and didn’t appreciate his attentions, Martin is tenacious. It would be admirable – and it *is*, to an extent – but all too often it leads to self-neglect, bordering on self-harm.

And right now, despite the thicker skin that Martin has been forced to grow through necessity and loss, his demeanor when he looks at Jon is vaguely reminiscent of those early days in the Archives: tentative, yearning for approval, dreading reproach. With a pang of old guilt and a desire to soothe, Jon forces a smile and kneads the back of Martin’s hand with his thumb.

“I trust you,” Jon says, “and I know you’re more than capable. Just – when the fog starts to creep up on you, try to remember that there are people who care about you. You’re not a burden; you’re not – unseen, unwanted, undeserving, or – or whatever other lies the Lonely wants to tell you. You’re not alone. Not anymore.”

“Right,” Martin says in a breathless whisper. He gives Jon’s hand another squeeze before letting go. “I guess I, uh – I guess should head upstairs.”

“Your shoes are by the door.” *God, that sounded domestic.*

“O-oh. Right, thanks.”

“And – you can text or call if you start feeling Lonely,” Jon blurts out as Martin turns to leave. “S-sorry, I don’t mean to – to *hover,* it’s just… sometimes it helps.”

In Scotland, once Jon was too hungry to safely visit the village, Martin had to go on supply runs alone. Although he had largely left the Lonely behind, it still lurked in the background, waiting for quiet moments in which it could seep back in through the cracks it left behind. It was opportunistic and insidious, passive until it wasn’t, and it could strike unpredictably. And so, he and Jon would check in with one another frequently whenever Martin had to go into town.

In many ways it was an exercise in codependence, but they were doing their best, considering the circumstances.

“Thanks,” Martin says, splotches of pink staining his face again. “I – I will.”

“There’s no service in the tunnels,” Georgie reminds them. “Just in case you were planning on going down there today, Jon. Martin, do you have the rest of our numbers?”

“I have Basira’s. And Melanie’s.”

“Give me your phone. I’ll add my number. And Daisy’s.” Martin makes a face at that, but hands his phone over. “If Jon doesn’t answer, text one of the rest of us. We can make sure to always keep someone up here and reachable, just in case.”

“That’s really not necessary,” Martin says stiffly. “I don’t need my hand held every second of the day.”

“No, but you might need your hand held at *any* second during the day,” Georgie says, entirely unfazed by the shift in attitude, “and there's no shame in that. Sometimes a bad time sneaks up on you. Doesn’t hurt to be prepared.”

“I’ve always taken care of myself. I can handle a few hours alone.”

“I’m sure you can, but that doesn’t mean you have to.” Martin looks ready to object, but Georgie cuts him off. “You’re not going to win this argument; I’ve already heard it all before. I’ve known this one” – she jerks her thumb in Jon’s direction – “for years, and you have near-identical hangups about being an inconvenience or whatever.”

“I’m right here, you know,” Jon mutters.

“Yeah, this is directed at both of you. People want to help you. The world won’t end if you let yourself accept it without berating yourself in the process.” Georgie looks between the two of them as she hands Martin’s phone back, and then chuckles. “Huh. You two have damn-near-identical scowls, too, by the way.”

Simultaneously, Jon and Martin both roll their eyes.

Compared to the last time Jon saw her, Melanie looks… well, *better.* The wild, furious look in her eyes has subsided and the bags underneath are no longer quite so heavy. Her posture doesn’t look *relaxed,* exactly, but she doesn’t seem nearly as overwrought. She's still clearly weighed down by ambient tension, but she always has been – and the Archives have a way of making even the most well-adjusted person feel on edge.

She pauses at the bottom of the ladder, watching Jon with an air of distrust and uncertainty. Then Georgie takes her hand and a little more of that stiffness bleeds out of her. She allows Georgie to lead her over to the circle of chairs where Jon waits, and mirrors Georgie when she sits.

The ensuing silence is thoroughly unsettling. When it becomes clear that Georgie isn't going to break the ice for them, and Melanie likewise keeps her silence, Jon reluctantly takes the initiative.

"Hi," he says eloquently. He starts to give a little wave, but doesn't fully commit to the motion, instead allowing his hand to hang awkwardly in the air for a few seconds before lowering his arm again, self-conscious.

"Hey," Melanie replies – guarded, somewhat flat, but without any outright hostility.

Melanie scuffs one foot against the ground. Jon bounces his leg, chewing the inside of his cheek as he stares at the floor. Neither of them speak.

"So…" Georgie says after a minute, drawing out the vowel. "Do you two want me to, uh… I can leave, if you'd prefer to have this discussion in private?"

"Stay," Melanie says abruptly, seeking out Georgie's hand again. Georgie looks at Jon, a question in her eyes.

"I don't mind. You can stay, Georgie."

"If you're sure," Georgie says. "Just – let me know if that changes, I suppose."

More silence. When Jon can't take it anymore, he blurts out: "H-how have you been?"

"Well," Melanie says sardonically, "I'm essentially trapped in an eldritch fear prison, doing the bidding of an evil voyeur-god, and apparently the only way out of its unfathomable contract is to gouge my eyes out."

"Right," Jon says with a hollow laugh. "Stupid question."

“How are you?” Melanie asks with mock cheeriness.

“Same as you, really. Well – except for the eye-gouging clause.”

“What, don’t have the stomach for it?”

“No, uh – it… it just won’t work for me, is all.” Staring down at his lap, Jon occupies himself with tracing circles onto one knee with his fingernail. “The Beholding isn’t keen on losing its Archivist.”

“It didn’t mind losing Gertrude.”

“Gertrude… wasn’t as far gone as I am,” Jon says quietly. “She never fully embraced the power the Eye offered. Not to the extent that I did. Blinding herself would have released her from the Eye’s service. She planned on it, actually, but Elias got to her first. And she was still human enough for a gunshot to kill her.”

And wasn’t that a release, in a way? Is it morbid for Jon to envy the fact that Gertrude even had that option available to her?

“Right,” is all Melanie says. She sounds dubious.

“I’m not just speculating a worst-case scenario to give myself an excuse not to go through with it.” Jon can feel himself bristling now. “I *know* it won’t work. I’ve *tried*. Multiple times. It hurts like hell, and then I heal. All I got out of it was an onset of chronic cluster headaches – though, who knows,” he adds acidly, “that may have just been the side effect of becoming a linchpin of the apocalypse and having all the world’s terror crammed into my head. I didn’t bother Knowing. It wouldn’t have made a difference.”

“Jon,” Georgie says mildly – and all the fight goes out of him, shoulders slumping.

“Sorry,” he sighs. “Didn’t mean to snap.”

“I wasn’t scolding you. It’s just – you’re scratching.”

Oh. Jon looks down to see long, angry red scratches on his forearms, already fading now.

“Sorry,” he says again. “Didn’t notice.”

“It’s alright.”

Another awkward pause, until Melanie breaks the silence.

“Are you sure blinding will work for the rest of us?” she asks. She no longer sounds suspicious. Simply… curious: reminiscent of how things used to be, back when she was an avid investigator, beholden only to herself.

“Yes.”

“Did I…? Last time?”

“Are you sure you want to know?” Jon waits until Melanie gives a firm nod before he answers the question. “You did.”

“And it worked.”

“It worked.”

Melanie nods again. She's clenching her teeth, if the subtle movements in her jaw are any indication. Closing her eyes, she takes a deep breath in, lets it out slowly – and her shoulders relax. By the time she's opened her eyes, there's the hint of a smile on her face.

"Good," she says, equal parts relief and determination.

"S-so, do you think you'll–" Jon stops himself, shaking his head. "No, sorry, I shouldn't pry."

Melanie simply shrugs. "I haven't made a decision yet. Let's just say I'm strongly considering it."

Georgie's hand tightens on Melanie's, worry lining her face.

"Tell me what happened last time?" Melanie says. "I'd like to hear the whole story."

Jon takes a deep breath, rubbing his arms as he orders his thoughts.

"Last time, I didn't know about the bullet until after I woke up," he begins. "I, ah, only saw you briefly – you were, um… you were convinced that I wasn't me anymore. Didn't want me anywhere near you."

Thought I should have been the one to die, he doesn't add. Most days, Jon couldn't find fault in that assessment. He didn't *want* to die – most of the time, anyway – but if he could have traded his life for Tim's… well, it wouldn't have been a difficult decision.

"So how did you find out about it, then?"

"I just… Knew it, all of a sudden."

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Melanie narrows her eyes suspiciously.

“It’s an Archivist thing. I mean, you're probably already aware – I just… Know things, sometimes, even without compelling anyone. It started before the Unknowing, but it wasn’t as noticeable. Or as often. And it was typically more vague impressions, rather than specific truths. It got worse after I woke up from the coma. More frequent, more detailed, more – intrusive.”

“Fantastic,” Melanie says sourly.

“Yes, I’m not thrilled about it either. Sometimes I can Know things by choice, but the Beholding has a tendency to withhold answers to the questions I *actually* ask. Mostly it just airdrops information on me unsolicited. Often without me even wondering about a thing. Just… apropos of nothing. I did have much more control over it after the world ended, but, well…” He shrugs, awkward. “Not anymore. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” Melanie repeats.

“Last time, I had – still have, I suppose – a tendency to Know things about specific people. Things they wouldn’t normally share with me. I still remember things I Knew back then. Including some things about you.”

The color rises in Melanie’s cheeks. “That’s–”

“An invasion of privacy, I know,” he says, contrite. “I really will try to avoid it, just… sometimes things slip through the cracks when I’m not paying attention.”

“So, what, you can read minds?” Melanie says, an accusation threaded through the question. “Like Elias?”

Jon visibly recoils.

“Melanie,” Georgie begins, but Jon cuts her off.

“No, it’s – it’s a fair question. Elias’ powers come from the same source mine do.” He pauses, nervously flexing his fingers as he composes an explanation. “I can’t see your thoughts verbatim. It’s just… Knowing things. It’s the same with Elias. Sometimes it *seems* like he can read minds, b-but that’s – that’s just because he’s very – very good at reading people–”

“–finding you when you’re at your lowest point, when you’re your most emotionally vulnerable. And when you’re at that point it’s astounding what can crawl into your heart and start to fester there–“

Jon bites his tongue, applying pressure until the Archive stops its clamoring. Melanie raises her eyebrows in an unspoken question.

“Sorry. Sometimes it just slips out, and…” He laughs and massages his temples. “Well. Still an Archive, in the end.”

His voice cracks and Georgie’s already-concerned expression grows more serious.

“Jon–”

“I’m fine, Georgie,” Jon says, more curtly than intended. “Sorry. I just – I can’t go there right now.”

“We can take a break if you need,” she says.

“No, I… let’s just continue.” He nods at Melanie. “You have more questions.”

Melanie gnaws on the inside of her cheek for a moment, mulling over her words.

"Can you do that…" She wiggles her fingers vaguely. "That thing where you put thoughts in people's heads?"

"No. Not – not really."

Not anymore, he corrects privately. During the apocalypse, he was able to make others See and *feel* things, but… only because he could call upon the Ceaseless Watcher to turn its gaze upon them. Here in the past, the Beholding and all the other Fears remain cloistered behind their door, leaching through the cracks but unable to fully manifest in the world.

"But I, um…" Jon pauses, wetting his lips nervously. "In addition to compelling people to tell me things, sometimes I can compel people to… to *do* things. Nothing – nothing complex. Simple commands, mostly. 'Stop,' 'leave,' 'look,' 'don't look,' that sort of thing. I haven't done it often, but the times I have… with a few exceptions, it's usually been accidental. A sort of – knee-jerk defense mechanism of sorts."

"Hmm." Melanie crosses her arms, tapping her foot on the ground.

"I realize that reflects poorly on me." He swallows, mouth going dry. "It's… a terrifying prospect, being near someone who can do something like that, and doesn't have full control over it."

Jon knows – and Knows via billions of proxies – what it's like to have something *other* supplant his will and commandeer his body. Melanie deserves to know the risks of standing too close to him.

"I promise I'll try to keep it under control, I just – wanted you to be aware of it. I won't blame you if you'd rather not be around me."

"Stop being so melodramatic," Melanie says, rolling her eyes.

“I’m not,” Jon says flatly. “Compelling answers and – and subsisting on a diet of *fear* has always been more than enough to justify people keeping their distance. Adding more sinister bullshit on top of the pile doesn’t exactly do me credit. I know – *Know* how people see me.” He laughs, a harsh and humorless thing. “I can’t *not* Know.”

People tend to naturally give him a wide berth, as if they can *sense* that there’s something wrong about him, even if they can’t quite discern why. If he’s too careless, if he locks eyes with the wrong person, sometimes they can’t look away – and sometimes he can’t, either, and he’s forced to *watch* as the terror dawns in their eyes. Just like the nightmares, bleeding into his waking life.

Jon can *feel* when people are afraid; the Archivist in him relishes it, gravitates towards it like a flower turning to face the sun, soaks it in regardless of whether or not he wants it. And there is always a part of him that *does* want it, that always wants *more* – and isn’t that fitting, taking a page from the book of his very first monster? He is, quite literally, a thing of nightmares. Helen is right: he is what he is, and there’s no use denying it.

He’s always been hypersensitive to how other people perceive him. Being able to Know how people really feel about him has historically tended to confirm his customary hostile attribution bias. Vicariously feeling the reality of others’ hatred and fear of him, passively basking in it, being forced to *derive satisfaction from it* – god, it’s like cannibalizing his own vicious self-loathing, a sustainable resource that can be recycled *ad infinitum*. It takes self-flagellation to a new and perverse extreme.

“I Know when people don’t want to be near me,” he says, unable to suppress the bitterness in his tone. “When someone nearby is afraid, I *feel* it – as natural as sensing the temperature in a room. I *feed* on it. It’s not the same as consuming a statement – ambient fear isn't a substitute for actual *stories* – but I still… soak it in, so to speak. It's an automatic process. So if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not bask in the knowledge of how much the other people in the room can’t stand breathing the same air as me, if I can avoid it.”

“Jon,” Georgie tries again, “I know how things used to be, but–”

“It’s different now, I know. But the Eye tends to prioritize – well, *unpleasant* impressions. I know it’s only giving me one side of the story. That there’s more, even if I can’t See it. But

fear is *loud*. Doesn't leave room for *mindfulness*."

Georgie has a reply ready, but Melanie speaks first.

"Okay. I get it." At Jon's blank expression, Melanie heaves a sigh – aggravated, but not hostile. "It's like how anger was for me, okay? Rage has a way of drowning out everything else. Reliable, when nothing else can be trusted. Makes things clearer, simpler. Made me feel more… alive, real." She hesitates, crossing her arms and shifting uncomfortably in her seat. "Nourishing. Sort of. I guess."

"Yeah," Jon says, picking aimlessly at his sleeve.

"I'll just avoid being in the same room as you when I'm… having a day," she continues. Jon nods. "Or you can just tell me to go away if I'm – I don't know, giving off rancid vibes, or whatever."

Jon breathes a surprised, amused huff. "Well. Same goes for you, I suppose."

He's even more shocked to see a grin twitch to life on Melanie's face – very small, but present all the same. Then, appearing to take pity on him, she changes the subject.

"So, you Knew about the bullet."

"Yes," Jon says, grateful for the opportunity to move on. "But not until a couple weeks after I got out of the hospital. Didn't even realize I Knew it until I said it aloud."

"Meaning it had more time to poison me, where you're from. Was I… worse?"

"Well, the first time I saw you after I came back, you attacked me on sight, so… maybe? But I don't really have a point of comparison. That was the only time I saw you up until we

removed it, so I don't know how much you deteriorated in the interim. And this time, I only saw you after the bullet had already been removed."

"I attacked you?" She doesn't sound *surprised,* really. More… intrigued.

"In your defense, you didn't think I was *me* anymore. Tim died, Daisy was presumed dead, and I was still alive." He knows that, of the three of them, Melanie wouldn't have picked Jon to be the survivor. *I hope it hurts,* she'd said in her testament. Instead, he slept for six months and then woke up *wrong.* "You were angry, and afraid, and you had a bullet in your leg making it worse. You needed someone to blame, and Elias was beyond your reach."

So I was the next best thing, he doesn't say. Bitterness aside, Jon can't say he blames her.

Melanie narrows her eyes suspiciously. "Then how the hell did you convince me to have it removed?"

"We, uh… we didn't. I told Basira first. She – didn't think you would have agreed. So, we…" Jon forces himself to meet Melanie's eyes as he gives the confession. "We performed some amateur surgery. Without your consent. Basira procured some local anesthetic, and the Eye let me See where the bullet was, how to remove it with… minimal damage. You were using some rather strong sleep aids at the time, so you slept through most of it. You only woke up once the bullet was out. And you, uh, promptly stabbed me with the scalpel, though I – I probably deserved that."

"What the *fuck,* Jon."

"I – I know, I know. I'm – well, it might be – odd, to apologize for something that never happened from your perspective? But I am sorry. It wasn't right, for us to do it that way. We should have asked you."

"I might not have agreed." Her voice is tightly controlled, but there's still a quiet sort of fury simmering just under the words.

“No, uh – probably not. You said later that the anger was always there. Motivating you to keep going. Helping you survive. The Slaughter validated that rage. Made it feel like home.” Melanie stares, unblinking. “You told me the bullet stayed because you *wanted* it, and… we took that choice from you, decided what was in your best interests without asking you how *you* felt about it.”

Melanie is quiet for a few more moments, glaring at the floor, before her eyes flick back up to meet Jon's. “What would have happened if you didn’t get it out of me?”

“I can’t say for certain, but it’s likely that you would have become a Slaughter Avatar. Reached a point of no return.”

She scoffs. “So it was worth it, in the end?”

“I don’t know. I *want* to say yes. You saw me as a monster, and I doubt you would have wanted to become like me. Something inhuman, feeding on suffering. But…”

“But?”

“It’s easy to look at how things ultimately worked out for you and use that outcome to justify what we did,” he says, “but I – I’m not fond of the idea that the ends justify the means. I didn’t know at the time that you and Georgie were this close. If I did, maybe I could have asked her to talk to you, except…”

“We weren’t speaking,” Georgie says.

“Yeah. I – honestly don’t know what else we could have done, but… still, the way we went about it was wrong. You were trapped here like the rest of us, and we… we stole the only thing that gave you some semblance of control. What we did was a violation of your autonomy. I know that feeling, I *know* how it feels to…” Jon shakes his head. “We saved your life, or – your humanity, at least, but in doing so we took away your choice. Subjected you to more trauma, made it so you couldn’t feel safe anywhere. Eventually you quit, and you and Georgie seemed happy together after that, but the fact that you were able to start healing – that doesn’t change the fact that we hurt you in the first place. I’m sorry.”

“This place,” Melanie says with a breathless laugh.

“Yeah. It’s… not known for presenting benign choices. I’m, ah… I’m glad that this time, it was your own choice.”

“And what if I had still said no?”

“I probably would’ve given you the line about becoming a monster like me. I would have told you what happened last time – or, told Georgie and let her tell you, more likely, if only to avoid any, ah… *stabbiness*.” Melanie huffs, but it sounds amused rather than offended. “And if you still decided to choose the Slaughter after being fully informed… well, it wasn’t my place to take the choice away from you.”

“Even if I wasn’t in my right mind?” she asks.

“Even if you weren’t in your right mind.”

Melanie’s stare is piercing, scanning him for any signs of dishonesty. Eventually, she folds her arms and leans back in her chair with a *hmm*.

“What?” Jon asks, heart in his throat.

“Just – unexpected. Would’ve expected you to make a unilateral decision.”

Truthfully, Jon doesn’t trust himself to make those kinds of decisions. Last time, he’d let Basira call the shot. Not only did he trust her judgment more than his own – secretly, selfishly, he was relieved to abdicate at least some of the responsibility. He doubts that his conscience would have been able to carry the full burden of that choice.

Later, during the apocalypse, he *had* made an executive decision on someone else's behalf: Jordan Kennedy. In that instance, there was no one with whom he could share the blame. Although it was intended as an act of mercy, Jon cannot deny that he created an unwilling Avatar – stripped a man of his humanity and reshaped him into something *other,* same as had been done to Jon.

The people in that domain would have continued to suffer just the same whether it was controlled by an Avatar or a hivemind of ants. At least this way, one person could be spared the torture. But it didn't *save* anyone. It did not even end Jordan's suffering, only transformed it into a different, hypothetically more endurable but still horrific shape – one that Jon knew all too intimately.

It was done with merciful intentions, and he may have given Jordan the choice to reverse it – a choice that Jon has never been given himself – but making that decision for Jordan in the first place… well, at the end of the day, Jon could never shake the feeling that he'd taken a page out of Jonah's playbook. It wasn't the *same,* but it felt… adjacent, too much so for comfort.

The choice has haunted Jon ever since. It eats away at him every time he sees Jordan in his nightmares, whenever Jordan watches him with the same dread that he does Jane Prentiss. Yet, Jon still cannot say for certain whether he would do anything differently, if faced with Jordan's agonized pleading a second time.

But as for Melanie's particular situation…

"I know what it's like to have someone else decide on your destiny for you," he says quietly.

Melanie looks thoroughly unimpressed.

"Look, I – I understand why you resent me. Elias used you to further the Archivist's progress. Same as he used Tim, Sasha, and Martin, and Basira and Daisy, and Helen… even Jane Prentiss, Mike Crew, Jude Perry – and Jared, Manuela, Peter… everyone, *everyone* who crosses his path is either irrelevant or a stepping stone. Which means that everyone who crosses *my* path suffers."

Stop, Jon tells himself, shutting his eyes tight against the first stirrings of panic lapping at the edges of his mind. It's pathetic, he thinks, how easily he sinks into this headspace. Jon's mutinous brain does all of Jonah's work for him – like prodding at a recent wound, just to see if it still hurts, even knowing full well that it only sabotages the healing process. *Stupid, pointless. Just stop dwelling on it.*

He can't.

"All of it – *all* of it was to create the Archive to his specifications–"

"–bound together – I would look at him, and see a grim sort of destiny for myself: trapped here, until I became him; any future I might have had, sacrificed to his–"

"–and I just – I don't want people to look at me and – and see *him.* Or the Beholding–"

"–keeping its prisoners ignorant in pursuit of... knowledge–"

"–I've spent enough time being synonymous with the Eye. I don't want it. I never wanted it, even if I did choose to – to keep looking for answers–"

"–idiots who destroyed themselves chasing a secret that wasn't worth knowing–"

"–I can't reverse that, but I can still make it difficult for Elias to get any use out of me. But I'm sorry – I'm sorry that I let him do it for so long–"

"–any idiot could have seen it would play out that way–"

"–I'm sorry you got dragged into all this. I wish I could have gone back to the very beginning, back to the day I took the job, and – god, I *thanked* Elias for the opportunity, and he – he *smiled,* because he knew, he *knew* I would be easily manipulated, knew everything about me – knew all about–"

Thankfully, Georgie interrupts his heated muttering and brings that thought train to a jarring halt. Or – no, she's *been* saying his name, but he's only just now heard it.

"Jon," she says, loudly but calmly. She's leaning forward in her seat, hand prepared to reach over to him. "You're scratching again."

So he is. Badly. As soon as he stops, the scratches along his forearms heal, leaving only drying blood behind: thin, messy streaks painted across his skin and caked under his

fingernails. He should probably clip them shorter, at this rate.

"Sorry," he says, pulling his sleeves down to hide his arms. "I'm just – sorry."

"Change the subject?" Georgie offers, lowering her arm.

"I think that would be best," Jon agrees, discomfited and more than a little annoyed with himself. Will he ever be able to spare a thought for Jonah Magnus without completely unraveling in the process? Hell, will he ever be able to go a day without sparing a single thought for Jonah Magnus at all? *Okay, no, stop harping,* he reprimands himself. "Just – give me a minute."

Jon forces himself to take several breaths until he can no longer hear his heartbeat thundering in his ears. Once he regathers his composure, he meets Melanie's eyes again.

"What I mean to say is – I owe you a lot of apologies, Melanie. I was dismissive of you when we first met, and it just sort of – snowballed from there."

"It was mutual, I think," Melanie says guardedly.

"Still, I was – unprofessional, at the very least. And unnecessarily cruel. It was my job to be impartial, but I didn't have to be callous. Most of the statements that come in aren't real, but they aren't impossible, either. And even if a story *was* due to – substance use, or mental illness, or – or even just an overactive imagination… most people who came in still *believed* that their story was true. Their distress was genuine. They deserved comfort, not ridicule, regardless of whether or not their story actually happened the way they remembered. And beyond that, it was… poor research methodology, really, to refuse to entertain the possibility of a story's veracity simply because of my first impression of a statement giver." His voice grows quieter. "Or because of my own baggage."

"Your own baggage?"

“I, ah…” Jon deliberates for a brief moment on whether to share this part of himself. It seems only fair, given the personal details he knows about the rest of them. And… telling Daisy had felt cathartic in its own way, hadn't it? “I had a supernatural experience of my own once. Before working at the Institute, I mean. I was a child, so of course it was chalked up to an overactive imagination. And then at some point I was too old to still be afraid of monsters.”

Granted, he never shared the *details* of what happened, never told the full story – and only partly because he knew no one would believe him. The other part is that he was too ashamed to confess his role as bystander – to admit that he simply stood by and *watched* as the monster took someone else in his place. But it was more difficult to hide the psychological fallout of the experience: frequent night terrors, an acute onset of arachnophobia, outbursts whenever visitors knocked on the front door, vague babbling about monsters when pressed to explain his erratic behavior. He doesn't remember whether his grandmother fretted over the *source* of such newfound fears. He suspects that she may have just taken each new burden as part and parcel of taking care of a child who always seemed determined to be difficult in every conceivable way.

Jonathan, this has gotten out of hand, she had told him one night with hands on her hips, exasperated after once again finding every door and cupboard in the house thrown open. *Ten is too old to be sleeping with the lights on and checking closets for monsters.*

And with that, she had closed the closet doors, flicked the light off, and pulled his bedroom door shut on her way out. He had clung desperately to the hope that she would at least leave the hall light on – but moments later the thin strip of light filtering through the crack under the door was snuffed out. When he heard the click of his grandmother's bedroom door down the hall, he'd dissolved into tears. Turning his face into his pillow to muffle his sobs so as not to alert her to *yet another* of his childish meltdowns, he spent the rest of the night – and countless nights thereafter – sleeping in fitful stops and starts, plagued by phantom knocking and chitinous clicking and creaking doors. He knows now that such sounds were nothing more than hypnopompic hallucinations, the remnants of nightmares chasing him into wakefulness; knows that the web binding him in place and the hulking presence in the room were only symptoms of sleep paralysis; but at the time…

Jon shakes his head.

“The fear doesn’t go away just because people don’t believe it’s based in truth. So, I learned to hide it instead. To stop talking about it, even though I never stopped searching for an *answer–”*

"–was there when he was taken; he never got over what he saw. Or didn't see. After much searching and despair, it drove him into the waiting arms of the Institute–"

"–damn," he hisses, flustered.

"You okay?" Georgie asks.

"Yeah," he says gruffly. "Just – one moment."

Pause, breathe, recollect. Listen to the quiet – *which really shouldn't be so difficult, should it? Aren't archives supposed to be* quiet? *Why does* this *library have to be so horrifically noisy?* – and breathe, breathe, *breathe*. *Okay.*

"What I'm saying is, I coped with it – *poorly* – with denial. I could never shake the conviction that what I saw was *real,* no matter how I tried to rationalize it. But I was still afraid that admitting belief in monsters would – draw their attention to me, somehow. Again. And because of that, I was… unsympathetic, to people who were genuinely afraid. The last thing they needed was derisive skepticism. Or projection. I know what it's like to not be believed. I shouldn't have put others through the same thing."

"Huh." Melanie looks him up and down. "That's… unusually insightful for you."

"I had a lot of time alone to obsess during the apocalypse," Jon says drily. "Some of it even ended up being productive." Melanie snorts; Jon gives a cautious smile. "I, ah, also should have tried harder to warn you away from India. Or the Institute in general."

"And I would have told you to fuck off, because I already didn't like you, and you would have been just one more in a long line of pompous men acting like they knew better than me."

Jon laughs. "I suppose you're right."

“Look, we just – we both treated each other poorly. You were the easiest target to take my anger out on. Martin’s too nice, Basira was basically a hostage, Daisy is Daisy, and Tim… Tim wasn’t around much, and anyway, whatever flak I gave him, he would have shot right back. You were a prick, but I think I blamed you more than was fair. And I guess… you were – are – trapped as much as the rest of us. So. I’m sorry too.”

“Well, it’s not like I tried to make a good first impression.”

“Neither did I.” She glowers at him, daring him to challenge her. “Accept the apology or don’t, but don’t throw it back in my face.”

“*Fine*,” Jon sighs. “I accept the apology.”

“There. Was that so hard?”

“Excruciating,” he deadpans.

Georgie snorts. Melanie and Jon both look at her with a combined, “What?”

“Just… watching the two of you. I think I may have a type.”

Another simultaneous, *“What?”*

“Curious, stubborn, temperamental, cute, short…”

“H-hey,” Melanie protests, “I’m at *least* a few centimeters taller than he is–”

“One-point-eight, actually,” Jon mutters under his breath – and then cracks a smile, encouraged by Georgie’s bright, surprised laugh. Melanie just glares at him.

“You know,” Melanie says, “you make it *very* hard to like you sometimes.”

“Sorry.” He’s not sorry at all. Shooting Georgie an indignant glance, he adds: “Also, I’m not *cute.*”

“I’m sure Martin would beg to differ,” Georgie teases. Jon sighs, arms crossed and face uncomfortably warm. “Well, anyway…” Georgie grins, looking between the two of them. “Does this mean… truce?”

Melanie gives Jon another long, searching look, and Jon forces himself to meet her eyes.

“Yeah, alright,” she says after a moment, then looks down, bouncing her heel against the floor. “Seems the only one who *isn’t* trapped and miserable is Elias. And you’re not him. Or working with him. So.” She shrugs one shoulder. “That just makes you one of us. I guess.” When Jon doesn’t reply, she glances back up at him. “What’s that face for?”

“That, uh…” Speechless, Jon roots around for something substantial to say. Instead, one corner of his mouth quirks up as he says, with tentative daring: “That might just be one of the nicest things you’ve ever said to me, is all.”

“Yeah, well…” Melanie scoffs, but there’s a hint of amusement in it now. “I’m still going to call you out when you’re being a dick, mind.”

“A public service, really,” Jon says, wry and more than a little elated.

An invitation to playful bickering as opposed to scathing antagonism is, as far as he and Melanie are concerned, an undeniable olive branch.

Chapter End Notes

Jon: my type is Aggressively Idealistic Existentialists Who Give Amazing Hugs, apparently
Georgie: and my type is Short Nerds With Strong Feelings About Basically Everything

~*mlm/wlw solidarity*~

But seriously though,,, I love the idea of Georgie and Martin meeting the End and the Vast, respectively, and basically going "hey why don't you read some Camus and maybe you'll calm down???"

I need them and Oliver to have a philosophy book club. Actually everyone else can come too. Basira strikes me as the type to have some Strong Opinions about Certain Philosophers and yes sure that dude may have died ages ago and maybe she shouldn't take it so personally but if she found a Leitner that let her temporarily resurrect him for an hour she might just do so if only for the opportunity to debate his pompous ass in a Tesco parking lot. (#relatable. listen, I was a philosophy minor and I WILL pepper in the fact that I hate Kant. You cannot hold this against me.)

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- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

- Citations for Jon's Archive-speak are as follows, in order of appearance: MAG 094; 153; 144/101/111/014; 101.

- Martin's "I think our experience of the universe has value, even if it disappears forever" quote is from MAG 151 and yes it IS one of my all time favorite Martin quotes, how could you tell

- Disclaimer re: how Jon talks about his ace identity: I'm ace & projecting, like I do with Jon's ADHD/neurodivergence. The way I describe ace stuff is not meant to be reflective of all ace-spec people's experiences.

- would you believe me if I said the whole 'deservedness' spiel was written before the latest episode??? bc it was and then I read the newest ep transcript and I was like "oh"

- Sorry for the delay in getting this chapter out, btw. funny story: I accidentally let the prescription for my ADHD meds expire and I had to go like four days without them before I could go get another paper script bc it's one they can't submit electronically or call in, soooo I got fuck-all done for half of that week and it broke my writing flow :0 hoping to get back into my usual flow from here on out and manage to have the next chapter ready in 2ish weeks, but we shall see. Thanks for sticking with me <3 (I might start shortening chapters again, the last few have been 10k+ compared to the earlier 6-8k and I could probably stand to split them up a bit.)

- Speaking of the next chapter - yes, I AM planning on moving the plot forward I swear. I realize the last few chapters have basically taken place within a single week and have been mostly People Talking About Things, RIP.

- And as always, thank you for reading, and for all your comments! <3 They're basically 50% of my regular serotonin intake. The other 50% is my cat's motorboat purring.

Bait and Switch

Chapter Summary

In which Jonah Magnus receives a visitor; both sides line up their next moves.

Chapter Notes

Aaaaa it's been forever since I posted!!

So, last chapter was accidentally posted during the dreaded AO3 deadzone. I failed to take into account Daylight Savings Time, which hadn't hit my region yet when I posted. Meaning, when I posted Chapter 18, it immediately ended up on the second or third pages of the main tags. SO, in case anyone missed that posting: if you didn't read the part where Jon and Melanie have A Talk, skip back one chapter before reading this one. c:

Content warnings for Chapter 19: canon- & fic-typical Jonah Magnus, including manipulation, dehumanization, & surveillance/stalking behaviors; Jon internally reflecting on his self-harm impulses; discussion of the Dark and description of their Ritual (consistent with Manuela's statement in MAG 143); description of the aftermath of a natural disaster, specifically: glacial tsunami and flooding (context: memory of an Extinction domain passed through during the apocalypse); disordered eating themes (in the context of Jon's statement hunger); internalized victim blaming; aaaand a cliffhanger. (Apologies in advance.)

I *think* that's everything. Feel free to let me know if I missed anything.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For Jonah Magnus, one of the most unpleasant aspects of his incarceration is simple *boredom.* Although Watching from afar does provide some entertainment, the passive nature of observation leads to understimulation after a time.

Especially when there isn't much to watch.

Just over two weeks have passed since Jonathan Sims emerged from the Buried, and very little of note has transpired in the interim. The Archivist has been spending much of his time sequestered in the tunnels under the Institute, and he and his allies continue to retreat there whenever they all meet as a group. Jonah has been watching diligently – almost obsessively – waiting for one of them to falter: to let their guard down where Jonah can See, to let slip some useful scrap of information, to reveal any hint as to what they know and what they may be planning.

Thus far, there has been nothing. Jonah has even considered recruiting Peter to spy on them, but Jonah has never been one for admitting defeat. Peter would more than likely demand payment for such a favor – not to mention the inevitable *gloating.*

Besides, Peter has made himself even scarcer than usual as of late. He has not visited Jonah in weeks, instead skulking in the fog through which Jonah cannot See. Although Peter is no doubt aware of Martin Blackwood's growing estrangement from the Forsaken, he has yet to actually *address* the situation. In fact, he has not made contact with his assistant since before the Archivist clawed his way out of the Coffin's chokehold.

Peter has always tended to be fairly predictable, but this is a rare instance in which Jonah can only guess at what his next move may be. Perhaps Peter himself does not yet know; is merely keeping his protégé in suspense, fueling his escalating trepidation until a sure course can be charted.

In the meantime, Jonah is starved for insight, and so he awaits the imminent arrival of his other long-absent visitor with an almost giddy eagerness.

A few minutes, a harsh electronic buzz, and a curt, muffled exchange with a guard later, the door to the visiting room opens.

"Detective," Jonah says with a cordial nod, watching her from the far side of the table at which he has been seated.

With a heavy clunk, the door swings shut behind Basira. She waits until she's crossed the distance between them and taken her seat on the opposite side of the table before she acknowledges him.

“Not a detective,” she says stonily: her customary response to his address.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Don’t you *Know?”*

“Humor me.” The corners of Jonah’s mouth turn up – a snide smirk that unfailingly causes Basira’s hackles to rise. Despite that practiced impassive mask she wears, she really is so easy to rile.

Then again, isn’t anyone, provided the right buttons are pressed?

“Cut the shit, Bouchard,” Basira says, leaning forward and bringing her hand down on the tabletop with a loud thump. “I spent over a *week* attempting to follow up on *your* bad intel. Every lead, a dead end. Every contact, vanished or dead.” She narrows her eyes. “You *wanted* him to go into that Coffin, didn’t you?”

“And you didn’t?” Jonah asks with a tranquil smile.

“Of course I didn’t,” she snaps. “That’s the reason I came to you looking for an alternative – which *you* said there was.”

“Is it really my fault that you don’t trust your allies?”

“You sent me on a wild goose chase Knowing that there was no other option,” Basira says, ignoring the jab. “Why?”

“Come now, Detective.” Jonah chuckles and clasps his hands in front of him, his posture relaxed. “You can’t tell me that you actually care what happens to him.”

“Answer the question,” Basira says with an imperious stare. Quietly amused by the display, Jonah fixes her with an even, unblinking gaze of his own.

“As you just said, Jon’s foray into the Buried was the only way. And as *I* said, you have… hmm. *Trust issues.*” Basira redoubles her glower. “I presumed there was a significant risk that you would interfere. Thus, the mission’s success hinged on your absence.”

Jonah had actually intended for said absence to be far more extensive. Basira had come to him almost immediately following the Coffin's delivery to the Archives, seeking after a way to rescue Daisy from its clutches. Jonah's false leads were meant to send her globetrotting for weeks, giving Jon ample time to cast himself into the Buried without interference or discouragement. Instead, not only had Jon uncharacteristically discussed the matter with the others, rather than barreling off into danger on his own – he had actually managed to convince them to *go along* with his plans. Even more surprisingly, Basira had personally seen him off into the Buried the very next day, before she did even a cursory investigation of Jonah's intel.

Jonah only wishes he could have been privy to whatever Jon must have said to persuade her.

In the ensuing days, Basira did follow up on some of Jonah's leads, likely desperate for something to keep her busy and stave off any feelings of helplessness. But even then, she had barely left London, and then only for a day or two at a time. Not that it mattered by that point: Jon was in the Buried, and what Basira did in the interim was irrelevant aside from whatever entertainment Jonah could reap from watching her grasp at straws.

“Imagine my surprise when you *did* allow him to chase his own doom,” he tells her.

“Doom,” she repeats with an incredulous huff. “You Knew he would survive.”

“But *you* didn’t, and you let him go anyway,” Jonah says with a knowing grin. Then he shrugs, nonchalant. “You may not believe me, but it was a gamble on my part as well.”

“Meaning?”

“As I’ve told you before, I cannot See the future, Detective. The Coffin entombs its victims forever deep below creation. Before now, none have escaped its embrace after crossing its threshold. There was a significant chance that Jon would not survive.” A pause; a pensive hum. “Well, that’s not *entirely* true. The Coffin gives its victims no choice but to survive, forever buried. As to whether Jon would *reemerge*, however… the odds of that were daunting.”

There is no dishonesty in Jonah’s words. Jon’s self-sacrificial decision to enter the Coffin was foreseeable enough. He was perpetually crushed – *ha* – by survivor’s guilt and a desperate need to prove his worth, leaving him with barely a shadow of a self-preservation instinct. There was virtually no chance that he *wouldn’t* martyr himself, given the opportunity.

No amount of desperation or determination would have guaranteed his success, however.

“Then why?” Basira asks. “You’re obviously plotting something. Something you need him for. Why would you take the risk of losing him?”

“Would you believe that I simply wanted you and Daisy reunited?” Jonah flashes a disarming smile.

“No.”

“Fine,” Jonah says with a faux put-upon sigh. “Consider it a test – and a learning experience. Despite the consequences of his, shall we say… *underwhelming* performance during the Unknowing, Jon remains unwilling to harness his power. A time will come when he will be required to embrace his connection to our patron. If he stubbornly – *selfishly*, really – refuses to hone his abilities until he’s trapped with no other way out … well, needs must.”

“So you used the Coffin to force him into a corner. Used Daisy as bait.”

“The Coffin was a way to… *persuade* him to explore his true potential, yes.” Jonah tips his head back to look up at the ceiling, smiling to himself. “And it *worked.*”

Jonah has yet to determine *how* his Archivist has made so much progress, despite his having spent the past half-year wavering on the edge of Terminus, but the reality is undeniable: Jon’s power has grown since the Unknowing. Compared with his earlier failure to thrive, this most recent feat was *impressive*.

Now, it’s only a matter of convincing him to accept his role – to move past his foolish denial of his nature; to relinquish his white-knuckled grasp on the illusion of the humanity he so mistakenly overvalues; to fully give himself over to the Watcher and *ascend*.

“He has managed to achieve what no one – mortal, monster, or anything in between – has ever done before: he discovered a way out of the Buried, and followed it through to the end.”

Jonah is positively beaming with self-satisfaction and unrestrained pride. *He* raised Jon up to this point: planted a dormant seed, rooted it in place, cultivated and nurtured it, grafted and pruned and forced it into shape until it became something *greater*. Like alchemy, Jonah managed to take something dull and pointless and transform it into something truly invaluable: his chosen one, his prize Archivist – extraordinary, imbued with power, and blessed with a purpose far beyond its vessel’s paltry mortal ambitions.

Before, Jon amounted to nothing. Now, he is on the verge of self-actualization. With Jonah’s guidance, the Archivist is destined to serve a grander plan, and he will do so. Jon’s feelings on the matter are as unenlightened as they are irrelevant. They always have been.

“As for using Daisy as bait… that was nothing more than serendipity.”

Basira *growls* at that, and Jonah turns a placid smile on her.

“I neither predicted nor orchestrated her descent into the Buried, Detective, and I played no part in Jon’s decision to chase after her. *I* did not bait him. You know as well as I do that he doesn’t need to be induced to cast himself into harm’s way; he does that all on his own.” Jonah raises one eyebrow and tilts his head slightly. “I would have thought you would be

pleased, really. It was the best possible outcome: he dragged both himself and Daisy home unscathed."

"Unscathed?" Basira repeats, incensed.

"Fine – *relatively* unscathed," Jonah says with the beginnings of a dismissive wave, aborted when the handcuffs affixed around his wrists restrict the motion. "In any case, would you have rather he left your partner to suffocate in the dark, just to spare her the indignity of being bait? Can you honestly say that you would have passed up any opportunity to bring her home, no matter how slim? Even if you *had* objected to Jon's plan as strongly as I had anticipated, I imagine you would have given in eventually."

"Then why bother keeping me away?"

"Truthfully? Time constraints. Jon needs to progress sooner rather than later. We could not afford to wait indefinitely for you to come to your senses." Jonah leers at her with a discerning glint in his eye. "But we both know that in the end, your desire to reclaim Daisy would have outweighed any risk to Jon, no matter how great. We all have choices, and I Know where your loyalties lie. As does the Archivist, I'm sure."

And that fierce devotion – codependence, really – between Daisy and Basira is precisely what makes them such pliable pawns in the first place.

Jonah may not be of the Web, but he is nevertheless expert in his machinations, both by nature and via ample practice. He is nothing if not flexible: adept at extrapolating outcomes and smoothly maneuvering around setbacks. Moreover, he has an imaginative streak and an attention to detail that make him especially skillful at identifying and taking advantage of any potential opportunity that presents itself.

Jon, for instance, was one such opportunity: a seamless combination of weak spots to exploit and an innate compatibility with the Beholding. The fact that he was already marked by the Web felt like destiny, if not a direct blessing from the Mother. Who Knows, with the Spider?

Then there was Melanie King. Like Jon, her curiosity and drive are well-suited to the Eye, having tempted her back to the Institute time and time again. Her own encounter with the Slaughter presented the perfect opportunity to expose Jon to that particular Power. It's a shame that the situation has not panned out in the way that Jonah had hoped, but he always has had a gift for improvisation. In his experience, there is always another way. It's only a matter of finding it – or, failing that, forcing it into being.

And, finally, Daisy and Basira. A Hunter is always a useful tool to have on one's side, and this one is easily leashed so long as her partner is at stake – and vice versa. It is an essential boon, for – unbeknownst to them – Jonah had an additional ulterior motive in recruiting Basira.

Namely: this is Jonah's first attempt at molding an Archivist into a fully-fledged Archive. There was every chance that Jon would not survive his encounter with Prentiss, let alone his subsequent marks. He very nearly didn't survive the Unknowing. By now, he has proven his resilience, but it never hurts to have a backup.

For some time, Jonah considered Martin Blackwood as a potential candidate – hence why he was keen for Martin to begin recording statements during Jon's absence, and later to stay behind when the others went to stop the Unknowing. Much like Jon, Martin led an isolated existence. He had no social life or support network outside of the Institute; he had no prospects beyond financially providing for a mother who rejected his every attempt to care for her, who wanted nothing more than to sever the fragile chain anchoring him to her. It left him starved for purpose and connection, so very desperate for approval and determined to prove his worth. His curious streak is perhaps less overpowering than Jon's, but given the right incentive, Martin is easily persuaded to endure terror in order to pursue a mystery.

Just by virtue of working in the Archives, he coincidentally began to accumulate marks of his own. He was touched by the Corruption, the Spiral, and the Stranger early on, and he always has been a breath away from an encounter with the Lonely. However, though that inclination towards loneliness could be exploited to Jonah's benefit, it was also cause for concern. Martin's allegiance with the Eye could be easily eclipsed by his affinity for the Lonely, given the right circumstances. The past few months have only confirmed that notion.

Beyond that, as unassuming and malleable as Martin seems at first glance, he has demonstrated a manipulative streak of his own. Jonah has since been forced to admit that he underestimated Martin Blackwood, with dire results – and Jonah learns from his mistakes.

The most surefire way to manage Martin is to wield Jon's wellbeing against him. If Jon were to be eliminated, necessitating another Archivist, Martin would be significantly more difficult to control – and, at this point, far more likely to subsequently embrace the Lonely rather than the Eye. That alone could negate his candidacy for the role of Archivist.

Basira, though… she would do nicely. That requisite innate sense of curiosity is there, as is the incessant drive to satisfy it – to learn, to seek, to *know:* a detective in every sense of the word. Sometimes, she is reminiscent of Gertrude in her single-mindedness and results-oriented approach. Such determination and astuteness could disrupt Jonah's plans, certainly, but those traits are also a potential asset if properly directed.

There may be fewer avenues of control to exploit where Basira is concerned, compared with Jon. But there is little that Basira Hussain would not sacrifice for her partner. Lacking that, her need for a purpose – for a *mission* – offers ample means to handle her, so long as a tempting and believable enough goal can be fabricated for her to chase.

Basira is staring Jonah down now, jaw repeatedly tensing as she grinds her teeth.

"What *do* you need him for, anyway?" she demands, abruptly changing the subject. "What's in it for you? You're not staging a Ritual from in here, so why do you want him stronger?"

"The People's Church of the Divine Host," Jonah replies, matter-of-fact.

"The People's Church?" Basira straightens her posture and squares her shoulders, hands forming fists where they rest on the table. "But – Rayner–"

"Is dead, rest assured–"

Fury flits across Basira's face. *"Don't* read my mind–"

"–but apparently the death of their leader has done little to discourage his flock," Jonah overrides, paying no heed to her timeless grievance. "I have observed increased activity of

late in the vicinity of Ny-Ålesund, a small company town in Svalbard. I believe the last holdouts of the People's Church have congregated there, presumably with an aim of reattempting their Ritual. A desperate, last-ditch attempt, to be sure, but it poses a threat nonetheless."

Basira exhales heavily through her nose and shakes her head.

"And you want to toss Jon at it like a grenade," she says, fists tightening further, "and Watch what happens from a distance."

"Is it really so difficult to believe that I have a vested interest in preserving the world as-is?"

"Yes," Basira says flatly.

"I *am* bound to this earth as much as any other, you know."

"Sure. But you don't care what happens to it. You just want to be the one to call the shots."

"Believe what you like." Jonah offers a blasé shrug. "The fact remains: we have a shared goal in preventing the People's Church from plunging the world into Darkness. Will you really allow a petty grudge to interfere with averting an apocalypse?"

Basira massages her forehead as she deliberates, and Jonah savors the disturbance plain in her demeanor. After a few seconds of warring with herself, she glares up at the ceiling, releases another heavy sigh, and meets Jonah's eyes.

"What are they planning?"

"I don't Know the precise details. The Dark and the Beholding naturally repel one another; I cannot See inside their stronghold any more than they can weather the scrutiny of the Watcher."

“And Jon? You think he can do any better?” Basira raises an eyebrow. “What, is he stronger than you now?”

“Not necessarily,” Jonah says, schooling his tone into one of unconcerned self-assurance.

The truth is closer to *yes* – or, rather, the potential for such a reversal exists.

The Archivist is uniquely positioned to channel the true essence of the Beholding. The abilities granted by the role are more varied and, in many ways, more formidable. Jonah can Watch, can force others to See what he Sees, can glean a general portrait of a person’s history and motivations and fears, but his ability to Know on demand is comparatively limited. He does not have equivalent powers of compulsion; his connection to the Beholding is not as intimate or as potent. In many ways, the Archivist is favored by the Ceaseless Watcher above any other. If Jon ever *did* choose to fully welcome the Eye into himself, to attain true mastery over the power it offers and wield it without hesitation… well, he would likely have little trouble overpowering Jonah.

Luckily, Jon’s weakness of character effectively prevents him from embarking on such a path. He harbors far too much uncertainty and *fear* to make such an ambitious choice; his guilty conscience weighs too heavily on the fragile backbone of his self-possession – and that is precisely why he is so ideal for Jonah’s purposes.

“Then what makes you think Jon will have any more luck against them?” Basira asks pointedly.

“Jon’s particular abilities simply differ from my own.”

“How so?”

“I would rather not waste time belaboring the fine details,” Jonah says glibly. “It suffices to say that we have different strengths, different… *skill sets,* if you will. And in this particular situation, Jon will have advantages that I do not. Also, my hands are tied, if you haven’t

noticed." He jangles his handcuffs for emphasis. Basira rolls her eyes in disgust. "Like it or not, I can only do so much from afar. Jon, on the other hand, has the freedom to confront them head-on."

"And you want us to, what – *trust* you, throw ourselves at another Ritual on command?" Basira says with an embittered, disbelieving laugh. "Have me drag Jon up to Norway, take the risk of–"

She cuts herself off. Jonah finishes the thought for her without missing a beat.

"Of tempting him with adequate nourishment?" Basira fixes him with her most baleful glare. Jonah meets it with a pleasant smile. "How long *do* you intend to keep him in confinement?"

"I'm not holding him captive. It was his decision. He doesn't want to take any new statements."

"Is that what he said?" *Jon always has been one for denial,* Jonah thinks to himself with a soft chuckle. The chain binding his wrists rattles as he props his elbows on the table, laces his fingers together, and rests his chin on the bridge they form between his folded hands. "I assure you, Jon *does* want it, much as he *thinks* he wishes otherwise. It's in his nature. He knows it, I know it, *you* know it – and you don't think he'll be able to resist indefinitely, do you?" A faint flicker of discomfort shows in Basira's expression – not quite guilt, but perhaps a cousin to it. "Oh, there's no call for shame, Detective. Neither Jon nor I would call your lack of faith unwarranted."

"Did you know this would happen? This – compulsion, or addiction, or – whatever it is?"

"Would you tell a starving man that his hunger was an addiction?" Jonah pauses to let that sink in. "Like it or not, statements are to him what calories are to any human – and what a chase is to Daisy, for that matter."

"He's making do," Basira says tersely. "They both are."

“For now, perhaps. But you’re a realist; you know that this status quo has an expiration date.” Basira purses her lips. Jonah sighs and lowers his hands, folding them in front of himself again. “Look at it this way: if you put a cat on a vegan diet, it might be able to survive for a time – malnourished, lethargic, miserable. But it isn’t sustainable. The cat is an obligate carnivore. It evolved with particular nutritional requirements, and there is *nothing* that can be done to change that basic fact of biology. You might soothe your conscience by thinking on the tiny lives that you’ve spared the cat’s hunger, but is it *really* justified to condemn a creature to slow starvation, when it is merely conforming to its nature?”

“And of course you want him to go prowling for innocent people to feed on.”

“As I said: we all have choices.”

“Yeah, and Jon’s made his.”

“And when he chooses differently, will you override it, impose a different choice on him?” A pregnant pause. “And what of Daisy?”

Basira says nothing, her mouth set in a firm, thin line.

“Do you know,” Jonah muses, “it really is *fascinating*, the artificial distinctions you draw between the two of them.” For the briefest of moments, Basira looks stricken. “I suppose you can’t be blamed for favoritism. We all fall prey to cognitive dissonance from time to time, don’t we?”

“If you’re finished with the mind games,” Basira says, fighting to recover her composure, “do you have any *useful* information for me? Or is ‘ferry Jon up to Norway’ all you have to offer?”

“Hm.” Jonah steeples his fingers, tapping the tips together. “I suppose it may be helpful to know that, with the exception of remote research sites in the Arctic, Ny-Ålesund is the northernmost human settlement on the globe. The winter months are characterized by polar night. In fact, in December, the residents can enjoy twenty-four hours of total darkness.”

“How nice for the Church,” Basira mutters.

“Precisely. Luckily for you, this time of year you can expect the opposite phenomenon: midnight sun. The sun will never fully set, which should give you the advantage. That said,” Jonah continues, with all the casual, simulated charm of a travel agent closing a sale, “the temperature is likely to be in the single digits, if not below zero. I would recommend dressing warmly.”

“Sure,” Basira scoffs. “Anything else?”

“Only this: don’t spend too long deliberating. The People’s Church certainly won’t waste their time handwringing over ethics.”

The only response Jonah receives is the shrill screech of Basira’s chair against the floor as she pushes away from the table, stands, and turns to leave. With a loud buzz, the door opens to let her pass, and Jonah calls out a pleasant farewell.

“Good luck, Detective.”

Basira pauses, spine going rigid and fists clenching at her sides so tightly that the muscles in her arms visibly tense – and then, without a glance or a word, she crosses the threshold, letting the door shut behind her with a decisive thud.

With that, Jonah finally directs a casual smirk at his remaining visitor: a nondescript tape recorder, faithfully spooling away at his feet.

“Hello,” he says amiably. “So good to see that I have your attention.”

With an abrupt click, the recorder dematerializes. Jonah chuckles to himself, leaning back in his chair with a satisfied sigh.

When Jon hears the telltale click and subsequent whir of a tape recorder, he heaves an aggravated sigh. It only takes a moment to locate it, contentedly humming to itself from just behind his laptop. That makes six in the past ten minutes. He picks it up and adds it to the growing pile to his right. He's pleasantly surprised when he shuts it off and it doesn't immediately turn itself back on.

Then two more clicks sound out in quick succession. A quick glance confirms the arrival of a new pair: one standing on end underneath his chair, another half-buried underneath a toppled stack of papers on the ground.

Jon groans and presses the heels of his palms to his eyes. He stays like that for a few minutes, elbows propped on the table and head resting in his hands. He thinks he might even doze off to the white noise of the recorders' droning, only stirring when he hears footsteps approaching – Georgie's, judging by the sound. It isn't something he Knows; he's just familiar with her gait, after all this time.

When she stops in front of him, he doesn't immediately look up.

"Jon."

He hums in acknowledgment, but holds his position. The pressure on his eyes feels grounding; the darkness, soothing.

Georgie tries again: *"Jon."*

Jon takes a deep breath, exhales, and uncovers his face to meet her eyes.

"What is all this?" Georgie asks, eyebrows raised.

“Desk,” Jon replies, referring to the rickety card table set up in front of him. A portable camp light sits precariously close to the edge, flickering at random intervals, and he squints against the low light. “Work,” he adds, nodding at his laptop, gesturing vaguely at the various paperwork stacked atop the table and scattered on the floor around him.

Georgie frowns, her attention straying to the boxes of statement folders and cassette tapes that have been shoved haphazardly against the wall behind him.

“Don’t tell me you’ve decided to relocate your office to the ominous murder tunnels.”

“Not… entirely,” Jon says. “There aren’t any outlets down here, or internet, so it – it doesn’t work as a fully-functioning office space, but… yes, sort of.”

“Care to explain why?”

“It’s… quieter down here,” he says slowly. “Less oppressive.”

“Less oppressive?” Georgie repeats dubiously. “I thought you hated being down here.”

“I – I do. But… it’s also a blind spot.”

Jon has long since resigned himself to constant surveillance. When he lost full ownership of his own self, any shred of privacy was torn away along with it. He is no stranger to choreographing his daily existence with an audience in mind.

These days, though, he has to be more conscious than ever of everything he says, every word he writes, every implication he makes. In the past, Jonah was the one who hoarded knowledge and held all the cards. This time, Jon has a game-changing secret of his own to protect, and he cannot take the risk of giving Jonah any hints as to his Archivist’s future knowledge.

Not that Jon can relax in the tunnels, either. It's bad enough that Helen makes her home down here and has a penchant for jump scares and ambush gaslighting sessions. Beyond that, this is where Gertrude was murdered, where Jonah Magnus' eyeless corpse waits, where the NotThem is trapped – speaking of which, Jon still needs to discover the whereabouts of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and liberate it from Peter's possession.

It's just one more item on an ever-expanding to-do list – which, if he's honest with himself, mostly consists of dozens of things that can (and, once upon a doomed time, *did*) go wrong, but no solid plans on how to actually *avoid* those missteps and right those wrongs.

In any case, camping out down here is far from ideal. But at least it's a change of scenery. When he asked Basira to help him set up a makeshift workspace down here two days ago, she didn't ask why.

"Sometimes I just need a reprieve from…"

From one gaze in particular – and, even more specifically, the prospect of his own eyes being used as vehicles for Jonah's scrutiny.

"Watching." Jon bites down on his thumbnail, his other hand fluttering distractedly. "As a general concept."

"Okay," Georgie concedes, reluctant but understanding. "But… I don't know if it's a good idea for you to be down here *alone.* I mean, your ability to Know things is dulled down here, right?"

"That's, ah…" Jon gives a dry chuckle. "That's part of the appeal."

The Knowing is worse on some days than others. Jon has already written today off as one of the bad ones. The entire morning had been intolerable: tidbit after unsolicited tidbit of information slipping through the cracks, filling his mind with intrusive, largely irrelevant

trivia. It's why he's ferreted himself away down here for the last few hours: it muffles the din, and right now, that's worth subjecting himself to the sinister atmosphere.

"Yeah, but it also means you won't have a heads up if you're in danger. And you don't have cell service down here." Georgie bites her lip. "Just – please be careful?"

"I check in with the others every half-hour or so. And if I forget, or lose track of time, they usually come to check on me eventually."

"A lot can happen in thirty minutes, Jon–"

"That's what I told him."

With a sharp intake of breath, Jon jumps at the sound of Daisy's voice. He glances to the left to see her standing at the base of the ladder.

"Christ, Daisy," he says through a heavy exhale. Even now, deprived of the Hunt's favor and sporting a knee brace, she tends to be preternaturally silent in her approach.

"You're going to give him a heart attack if you keep sneaking up on him like that," Basira says as she begins her own descent.

"Sorry," Daisy says, squeezing her eyes shut and gritting her teeth, chin tucked to her chest. Jon recognizes that hangdog expression of hers. It conveys the same flavor of shame that he experiences when he accidentally compels someone.

"It's fine." Jon watches as she repeatedly clenches and relaxes her fists at her sides. In an attempt to dispel the tension, he offers her an awkward smile. "Not your fault I have an overzealous startle reflex."

"You can't tell me that I didn't contribute to that," she says, barely more than a whisper.

Jon doesn't reply to that. She's not entirely wrong, she's too self-aware for him to deny it, and honestly, he's not sure that he *should* deny it.

Basira dismounts the ladder and stands in place, glancing between the two of them with an inscrutable expression on her face.

"Come on," she says. Daisy takes her proffered arm with only a passing moment of hesitation. Her gait is still slow and unsteady as they make their way towards the others, and she lets out an involuntary, pained hiss as Basira helps her lower herself into a chair.

"Where's Melanie?" Basira asks, nudging an empty chair closer to Daisy and settling into it.

"She wanted some time to herself," Georgie says, taking her own seat.

Because Melanie often needs to decompress after therapy, Jon remembers. Earlier, he inadvertently Knew that Melanie had a therapy appointment this morning. That particular flash of insight was actually the last straw prompting him to throw his hands up in frustration and flee to the tunnels before the trickle of information could turn into a flood. Once a certain avenue of inquiry manifests itself, his mind often wanders down it without his intention or permission. There was a very real risk of accidentally catching a glimpse of Melanie's therapy session, and he's already invaded her privacy enough for one lifetime. For several lifetimes, even.

"She might be along," Georgie continues. "If not, we can just fill her in later."

"And Martin?" Basira asks.

"He's probably waiting for a safe opportunity to leave his post without Peter noticing." Jon looks to Basira. "Maybe we can wait a bit longer?"

Jon cringes when he hears himself speak. The request sounds far more timid than intended. In the past, that walking-on-eggshells demeanor could sometimes rub Basira the wrong way. If she notices this time, though, she doesn't call attention to it.

"Yeah, alright," she says. Her eyes fall on the collection of tape recorders Jon has amassed on the table. "You recording?"

"Not by choice," Jon sighs. "They just keep… appearing."

"Maybe they're hungry," Daisy says wryly. Then, her expression turning serious: "It's been two weeks since the Coffin. You still haven't come to me for a statement."

"Haven't needed one just yet," Jon says, a bit too hastily.

"You sure about that?"

"W-well, I…" Jon looks away and occupies himself with petting his scarf, draped over his shoulders with the ends resting in his lap to serve precisely that self-soothing purpose. "You only have so many stories, right? It's probably best if I ration myself."

"I don't want you starving yourself that badly again," Georgie says with a hint of reprimand.

"I know. I – I won't. But I don't – I don't want to… *feed"* – he says the word with unconcealed disgust – "until it's absolutely necessary. I've been making do with old statements."

"I thought you said they didn't work," Basira says, eyes narrowed.

"They don't. Not really. But sometimes they take the edge off. Sort of like…" Jon breathes a bitter laugh. "Well, like chewing gum when you're hungry. Or eating ice chips. It doesn't have any nutritional value, but it can be a… a distraction."

A distraction that works only as long as he's actively recording, but it's better than nothing.

"I, um… I probably will need to take you up on the offer soon, though," he says quietly, still avoiding eye contact.

"Tonight?" Daisy suggests.

Jon hesitates. The Archivist in him rears its head, snapping to attention like a cat catching sight of potential prey. He hides his hands in his sleeves as they start to tremble slightly.

"Tomorrow," Jon says. He tells himself that it isn't just to spite that noisy, invasive presence scratching at its door. "I can hold out until tomorrow."

Daisy seems ready to argue, but the trapdoor opens before she can say another word, and then Martin is making his way down the ladder.

"Sorry," he says breathlessly as he approaches the group. "Sorry I'm late, I – I had to wait until…"

He trails off, but Jon knows how that thought ends: Martin doesn't like venturing outside his office when there's a chance of encountering another person. The risk of locking eyes, of brushing shoulders, of being engaged in conversation – all of it is still far too daunting for him. It's safer to wait until the building clears out for the day – and to show up early enough each day to avoid the morning rush. When he decides to go home at all, that is.

Funny, how his routine these days so closely mirrors Jon's own old work habits.

Martin does seem to be recovering, though, slowly but surely. Case in point: he does not hesitate before choosing the seat closest to Jon. Knowing Georgie, she left it empty for exactly that reason.

“Hi,” Jon says intelligently. He’s fairly certain that the expression on his face is transparently lovestruck, but he can’t bring himself to feel embarrassed.

“Hey.” Martin’s reaction is slightly delayed, his movements sluggish – the cost of having spent most of the day alone. It always takes some time for those aftereffects to subside. “Did I miss much?”

“We were waiting for you,” Basira says.

“Oh, uh – sorry–”

“It’s fine,” Basira says brusquely, intent to move onto the matter at hand. “Does anyone else want to go first?” A brief glance around at the rest of the group yields no response from the others. “No? Fair enough.” She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes, steeling herself. “So…”

“Jonah,” Jon sighs.

“Yeah.” Both of Basira’s hands are already going up to massage her temples. “Jonah.”

“That bad, huh?” Georgie asks.

“You’ve not met him.” Jon’s attempt to infuse wry amusement into the statement falls flat.

“He’s the worst,” Martin says, his tone simultaneously resentful and bone-tired. “The absolute worst.”

“Melanie did mention his terrible personality,” Georgie says with a cautious smile, as if to encourage a vent session. “Several dozen times. Even apart from him being – well, you know.

Evil."

"He's… exhausting." Jon runs a hand through his hair, shaking his head with a humorless chuckle. "He somehow manages to combine supernatural evil with your more mundane, garden variety white-collar corporate monstrosity. And he has a god complex that I am *fairly* certain has roots in Victorian-era imperialism. At least to some extent."

"Pompous Machiavellian bastard," Basira adds.

"Always playing mind games." A low but distinct growl accompanies Daisy's words. "Gets off on unnerving people."

"Slimy, manipulative–" Martin blows a rogue lock of hair out of his face with a peevish huff. He's working himself up to a proper rant, if Jon is any judge. "And he has an *extremely* punchable face. Prick."

At Martin's words, a memory comes rushing back:

The two of them were wading through the muddy, thigh-deep floodwaters of another Extinction domain, this one set in the aftermath of a catastrophic glacial tsunami. Timeless *aftermath: the stagnant waters would never recede; the floating detritus would perpetually accumulate; the same souls would drift endlessly through the ruins of their once-dependable community, searching for missing loved ones, crying out for salvation and closure and answers that would never come.*

It was a snapshot of a smaller Armageddon, cut off from the wider world and frozen in time for as long as time was to exist.

Jon could not help but dwell on the irony. The domain was predicated on a very particular and timely flavor of fear: cataclysmic natural disaster as a consequence of global climate change. One of the hallmarks of such a potential future was its pervasiveness. The nature of such an apocalyptic scenario was that it would never be localized: climate change would transform the entire globe, devastating even – and especially – those least culpable.

A common thread among the statements generated by that place was the fear of a comparatively small collection of powerful, myopic actors holding the fate of the entire world in their hands. Endless suggestions for lowering one's individual carbon footprint were touted, while the tragedy of the commons played out uninhibited in corporate boardrooms and ineffectual legislatures. Averting such a future could seem futile when those with the power to prevent its passing were so disinclined to do so, whether it be for profit, convenience, denial, shortsightedness, or simple lack of caring.

Perhaps the domain's detachment from the whole was fitting, though. A ham-fisted commentary on human self-centeredness, of only acknowledging a disaster when it was immediate and personal. Or perhaps it was simply a treatise on the nature of fear. Mortal terror has a way of drowning out everything else, after all. The mind devotes all of its resources to survival, whether it be fight, flight, freeze, fawn, or some disorientating combination of the four. Any protective impulse that breaks through the din tends to favor the personal: loved ones, valued objects, treasured places.

It wasn't surprising for the people trapped in that place to have precious little thought to spare for the state of the world in general. It was only human–

Jon's rumination screeched to a halt as he picked up the sound of Martin muttering furiously behind him. When Jon stopped in place and turned to look, Martin almost walked headlong into him.

'You alright?' Jon asked tentatively.

'Peachy,' Martin said, a bit too brightly. Jon raised his eyebrows. 'What, am I *not allowed to brood?'*

'I thought that was my *thing, is all.' Jon sidled closer and, in a stage whisper, asked: 'Do I need to worry about my job security?'*

That got a laugh out of Martin. With a shake of his head, he closed the few inches of distance between them and took Jon's hand in his.

‘Maybe I was just fantasizing about punching Jonah Magnus in the jaw,’ Martin said, swinging their joined hands between them as they resumed walking. ‘He has a very *punchable face, you know.’*

‘Can’t say I disagree,’ Jon said with an amused quirk of his lips.

‘Here’s a question,’ Martin said after a minute. ‘Who would you rather fistfight in a Tesco carpark: Jonah or Peter? Supposing you didn’t already smite Peter, of course.’

‘Now why would you ask me such an impossible question?’

‘Well, it’s that or I Spy,’ Martin replied, ‘and you have an unfair advantage with the latter.’

Jon can’t help smiling fondly at the memory.

“What?” Martin asks, watching Jon with a puzzled frown.

“Nothing, nothing. Just – remembering,” Jon says. “You said the same thing in the future.”

Fraught as it could be at times, the time they had together was… well, *cherished.* Those memories can’t be called *happy* per se – that world was not one where comfort could take root and flourish – but for a very long time, they were all Jon had. He had no memory of their respite in Salesa’s safe harbor. There was their short-lived time in Scotland, of course – it had been relatively peaceful compared to what came before and after, despite the undercurrent of apprehension and the aftereffects of their respective traumas. But the schism between the world-as-it-was and the world-as-it-became was far too deep. That old, tentative hope was too distant, too unattainable to be a sustainable source of comfort.

More often than not, it only made Jon feel worse. After all, wasn’t it his own fault that it came to such an abrupt and devastating end?

No, the memories that he ended up clinging to in those latter days were those stubborn moments of affection and comfort that they had managed to find – to *create* – in spite of the insurmountable odds. Kind hands, offered and taken. Playful banter, teasing without cruel intentions. Wry smiles and gallows humor, exchanged when the only other response would have been despair. Martin had a way of defanging the fear, superseding it with a fierce, protective love – which, yes, frequently manifested as tirades against Jonah Magnus, the Beholding, and Fear itself.

Martin was the one bright spot in that place, and there was no one Jon would have rather had by his side. It feels shameful to admit that he was *glad* of Martin's company, given what the journey entailed and Jon's own role in it all, but…

"Look, I don't exactly have many *pleasant* memories from that time, but the ones I do have…" Jon shrugs, looking away. "They're of you." When he chances a sidelong glimpse, he can see that Martin's lingering pallor gives way to a very slight blush. Jon can't help but smile at that. "Anyway, there was a *lot* of walking involved. On the way, you regaled me with some… *imaginative* takes on how you'd like to see Jonah Magnus suffer."

"And they say romance is dead," Daisy deadpans.

Maybe it could be said to border on flirting at times, Jon almost says, but he manages to stop himself for fear of putting Martin on the spot. Jon might be accustomed to this particular variety of fond teasing by now, but Martin…

Another glance confirms Jon's suspicions: Martin's blush is deepening. Jon can't help the swell of gratified affection that accompanies the pang of guilt he feels at Martin's bashfulness.

Then Jon notices the impatient expression on Basira's face.

"Anyway," he says, clearing his throat and turning his full attention to her, "how, uh – how was Jonah? I mean – I'm not – I'm not inquiring after his *wellbeing*, obviously, I just meant–"

“He was as cryptic and insufferable as ever,” Basira answers, rescuing Jon from his awkward stammering. “One part personal taunts, one part useless gloating about your ‘true potential,’ one part manipulative scheming. As far as I can tell, he hasn’t figured out how much we know. Seems confident that he still has the upper hand.”

“Did he mention–”

“Norway? Yeah.” Basira rubs the back of her neck, her face drawn in exhaustion. Daisy subtly extends her leg a few inches to touch her ankle against Basira’s, offering a point of contact. Basira’s shoulders relax almost imperceptibly. “Said the People’s Church is planning another go at their Ritual and you’re the key to stopping it.”

“That’s the story he gave you last time.” Jon nods, relieved to find himself on familiar ground. “Like I mentioned before, he’s trying to mislead us.”

“So, business as usual, then,” Daisy mutters. “That’s pretty much his whole deal.”

“More or less. But he tends to hide the deception under a layer of half-truths,” Jon says. “This time, though, it’s almost an outright lie. The People’s Church isn’t regrouping. When their Ritual failed in 2015, half of the congregation died and Maxwell Rayner was weakened. The surviving members threw all of their energy into searching for a new host for Rayner.”

“Callum Brodie,” Basira says.

“Yes. Most of the remaining disciples died along with Rayner during the police raid.” Jon glances between Daisy and Basira. “Jonah’s the one who called in the tip, by the way.”

“So it was all part of his long game,” Daisy says.

Jon nods again, but when he opens his mouth to speak, the Archive takes possession of his voice.

"…knew the Dark Sun was just sitting there waiting. So when it came, I just whipped up another apocalypse and sent you on your merry way…"

His head is still fuzzy with static when he notes the others' expressions – and only then does he realize what just happened.

"Was that…?" Martin bites his lip.

"Jonah's statement–" *Don't fall apart,* Jon thinks, willing himself to breathe through the moment and move on. "Doesn't matter. He's, ah – he's known since Gertrude's – murder – that a solitary Ritual is doomed to fail. The real goal all along was…" His gaze lands on his burned hand, and his pulse quickens at the sight.

"A mark," Basira says.

"Yes. Like the – like the, uh – the Unknowing," he says, pulling his sleeve down to hide the shiny whorls of scarred flesh from sight. *Keep it together.* "Just – opportunities for… well, for building the perfect Archive." *Deep breath in – hold – release.* "Any–"

The word catches in his throat, and he has to close his eyes and take another breath before continuing, forcefully imbuing his words with an uneasy calm that he does not feel.

"Anyway," he manages, opening his eyes, "the People's Church is defunct. There's only one survivor. Manuela Dominguez – she was on the space station *Daedalus* along with Jan Kilbride and Carter Chilcott. The other two were guinea pigs, sent up by the Fairchilds and the Lukases. Manuela was the only one who knew what the mission was really for: creating the Dark Sun."

"Eli–" Basira huffs. *"Jonah* called it the Extinguished Sun."

“That’s the name the Church gave to the Ritual. The Dark Sun was its linchpin. Pure darkness given form. A sort of…” Jon makes a circular motion with one hand. “A focus, of a sort.”

Like me, he thinks, and then: *Don’t go there; stay on topic.*

“And that’s what the People’s Church is safeguarding in Ny-Ålesund,” Basira says.

“Was, yes,” Jon replies. “Manuela’s statement goes into more detail, if you're interested.”

Basira nods, her eyes bright with interest. “I’ll pull it later.”

“No need. I have it here.” Jon gestures at a stack of statement folders next to his laptop. Over the few weeks he couldn’t use his own words, he made a habit of putting aside statements for Basira to read, to cut down on the amount he had to explain himself. Witnessing how keen Basira is to chase down every lead, he’s seen no reason to stop providing her with extra reading material. “Anyway, as for the Church… Rayner left Manuela behind while the rest of the congregation attended to his rebirth. She’s been holed up in Ny-Ålesund ever since.”

“Is she trying to complete the Ritual on her own?” Daisy asks.

“No. No, she’s been directionless since learning of Rayner’s death. Maybe given enough time, she could rebuild, recruit her own disciples, start a new crusade – but she isn’t in any state to do that just yet. She’s still in mourning.”

“Mourning?” Basira repeats.

“Yes,” Jon says. Something about Basira’s skeptical tone elicits a stab of discomfort. “She was human once. Whatever she is now, it doesn’t make her incapable of–” Jon looks away, self-conscious. “She was devoted to Rayner, and then he was gone. She had a purpose, and

now she doesn't. And there's no one left to share in that grief. So, yes, she's reached something of an impasse."

Basira is quiet for a long moment. When she speaks, all she says is, "Okay."

Jon shakes his head and changes tack. "Even if she did try something – any Ritual she tried to perform would fail even without intervention, same as it did the first time. She isn't a threat. Well. No more than any other Avatar, anyway."

"So you *could* just ignore the bait," Georgie says.

"Could do," Basira says. "But in that case, we need to be prepared for Jonah to be suspicious."

"He's going to find out eventually." Georgie looks at Jon when she says it. "I think you need to ask yourself whether it's worth following his leads just to keep him ignorant."

"I was already marked by the Dark." Jon shrugs. "That ship has sailed. Encountering it again won't make anything worse."

"You said that the marks aren't just physical. That they involve psychological trauma." Jon tilts his head, unsure where Georgie is going with this. "Meaning, whatever happened to get you marked the first time was traumatizing."

"I – I suppose?"

"So," Georgie says, pinning Jon in place with a look, "going through the same thing again would *re-traumatize you."*

"I mean – in theory, yes, but – the Dark wasn't – it wasn't that bad, especially compared to some of the others. And after – after I…" Jon swallows, his throat dry. "There are worse

things."

"That doesn't make it okay to put yourself through something you *know* will hurt you," Martin says, suddenly heated.

"Trauma is trauma," Georgie agrees. "I don't know exactly what happened last time, but if it still counts as a mark, then by your own definition" – Jon strangles the automatic surge of annoyance at having his own words turned against him – "obviously it affected you enough that it still lingers."

"Look," Jon says with a shaky exhale, "I know how – I know how it sounds, but it – it really is nothing compared to – to everything else."

The Dark Sun was awe-inspiring: terrible and beautiful to behold all at once. But the *fear* he felt when he Saw it… even now, he cannot untangle how much was his own and how much was the Beholding itself balking. Much like the oil-and-water relationship between the Vast and the Buried, he Eye and the Dark are fundamentally incompatible.

There was a strange dual quality to the fear: part of it his own mortal terror at confronting yet another supernatural threat, part of it a deeper, existential repulsion that hinged on his connection to the Eye. Then, as now, Jon *hated* that part of himself, that inescapable alien presence that insinuated itself into his mind until he could scarcely discern the difference between the *who* he once was and the *what* that he has become.

If Jon were to ever sit down to unpack the experience, he knows what he would find: a conviction that he deserves to be punished; a sense of release and relief in the aftermath of self-harm; enough self-loathing for a therapist to have a field day with it all. He knows that any violence directed towards the Archivist ultimately amounts to violence towards himself in a holistic way. He knows what Martin and Georgie and Daisy would say – and, in many cases, *have* said – if he were to voice these thoughts aloud.

He also knows that none of that makes it any less gratifying to offer up the Archivist in him to that which leaves it scarred and broken. To watch it squirm. To have it *hurt.*

That darker truth aside, though, his exposure to the Dark Sun *was* tame compared to… well, all the rest. Traumatizing, yes, but if he were to rank his experiences?

"I mean, I – I went into the Coffin again," he says, by way of example, "and that was – it was much worse than the Dark."

"Okay," Georgie says patiently, "but you had a good reason to go into the Coffin. There was no other way to bring Daisy home." Jon regrets bringing up the Coffin at all when he notices Daisy hunker down in her chair out of the corner of his eye. "If you're going to put yourself through hell, you'd better have a damn good reason for it. And as far as I can tell, the only reason you want to face *this* fear a second time is so Jonah doesn't ask questions."

"Is that really such a bad reason?" Jon snaps. "There's no shortage of things that terrify me. It's a *very* long list, and – and do you know what's at the very top? B-because it's not–" His voice wavers. His attempt to cover it up with a laugh only highlights his frayed composure. "It's not Ny-Ålesund."

Georgie has that pitying look on her face again. Jon can feel himself cringe away from it, the embarrassment of his outburst creeping in.

"Sorry," he says, hunching his shoulders.

Georgie's assumption is correct, though: Jon's primary motivation in considering a second trip to Ny-Ålesund *is* simply to avoid Jonah Magnus' suspicion. Enduring self-destructive impulses and justifications aside, he explicitly promised Georgie, Martin, and the others that he *wouldn't* endanger himself thoughtlessly. He meant it when he said he wanted to get better. And even if he didn't, there are easier ways to hurt himself than to haul himself all the way to Norway.

Scratch that last part, he tells himself with a twinge of shame.

"No, I – I get it." Georgie sighs. "It just worries me when you downplay these things."

“I hate the way you talk about yourself,” Martin says quietly, looking away. “Like it doesn’t matter what happens to you.”

“I know,” Jon says, abashed. “I’ll – try to keep it in mind.” One hand goes to the base of his skull to tug absently at his hair. “And we don’t – I suppose we don’t *have* to follow Jonah’s lead. Whatever our next step is, we should – we should probably decide as a team.”

“In which case,” Basira says, “we should lay out all of our options. So what happened last time?”

“You and I traveled to Svalbard. We went by ship, and I, um… I – I took a statement along the way. He was a shiphand named Floyd Matharu; he used to be–” Jon cuts himself off, biting back that part of him clamoring to recount the tale, to lay bare the man's secrets. “No. His story is his own. Point is – I insisted on that ship because I Knew someone on board had a statement, and I wanted it.”

Four pairs of eyes stare him down. He squirms and withers under their scrutiny: all assessing him with varying shades of apprehension, judgment, disappointment, and pity. No one speaks, and after a drawn and heavy silence, he continues, forcing himself to meet Basira's eyes as he speaks.

“When we arrived in Ny-Ålesund, Manuela ambushed us. You incapacitated her, and I… took her statement, too.” Jon takes a deep breath. “She told us about the Extinguished Sun. A week of celebration, feasting, and sacrifice, all in preparation for an eclipse that was scheduled to pass over Ny-Ålesund. Things were going as planned, at first. Then a smaller ritual at Hither Green Dissenter's Chapel collapsed under its own weight, but the Church continued its activities at the primary ritual site. Drowning sacrifices, drinking blood, singing hymns…”

“Sounds like a B movie about a Satanic cult,” Georgie says.

“Well, the Rituals do operate on a sort of… shared construction of reality, I suppose, infused with dream logic. It isn't surprising that common tropes and… *aesthetics* would feature, whether they be from historic folklore or modern pop culture. It’s all about symbols, archetypes, and expectations. It works because the ones performing the Ritual have faith that

it will. The stronger the belief, the more power those ritualistic practices have to manifest changes in our reality. Mind over matter, in a way–"

"–to take dark matter, dark energy, and harness it, bring it forward into a form that could be held, used… worshiped. Scientifically, it was nonsense of course. Dark energy and the like don't work like that, not even remotely. But that wasn't important. What mattered was that it felt like science, and that was all I needed–"

Jon stops himself with a huff and a scathing, "Yes, *thank you,* Manuela."

"Makes sense, though," Basira says. "Or – a certain kind of sense, anyway. If the existence of the Fears is dependent on how we perceive them…"

"And that dream logic was even more pronounced once I opened the door. Before, they could only come through in bits and pieces. Like–" Jon sighs a short exhale, remembering Leitner's analogy from so long ago. "Like an ant being besieged by an arm and a leg, and being unable to perceive each as part of a single human being. The monsters, the Leitners, the events that get documented in the statements – they're just… extensions of those entities, poking into our reality through the gaps. Once they were able to be fully present in our world, though… they rewrote reality. And it was the dream logic of Jonah's Ritual that paved the way for it all."

"But a single Power can't come through the door alone," Basira says.

"Exactly," Jon says. "Fear is too complicated to be teased apart into distinct categories. It isn't enough to pull an arm or a leg over the threshold; all the rest needs to cross over as well. So, on the day of the eclipse, the door opened. And then it closed."

"Anticlimactic," Daisy snorts.

"It was, to hear Manuela tell it. The same happened with Jonah's first attempt at the Watcher's Crown over a century ago, and to all of the other standalone Ritual attempts before and since. Of course, the People's Church assumed that Gertrude was to blame, given her track record with other Rituals, but she was standing by, testing her non-intervention theory. And using the Extinguished Sun as cover, so she could burn down the Archives and destroy Jonah's original body."

“What?” Martin interjects.

“She suspected Elias’ true identity after the death of James Wright, but she managed to play ignorant for years while she looked for a way to reach the Panopticon. And she figured out that his powers of omniscience were limited, same as we did. She was hoping he would be too preoccupied observing the People’s Church to notice what she was up to.”

“Wait,” Martin says. “You’re telling me her plan was to commit a bit of arson when he was distracted?”

“Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?” Jon asks, grinning at Martin’s awestruck tone. “Though I suppose in our case, arson *was* the distraction.”

“Should’ve dreamed bigger, I guess,” Martin says with a dry laugh.

“Fire does seem to be a reliable way to catch his attention. Who knows, maybe her plan would have worked better with a second decoy,” Jon quips. “Someone to burn a few statements and keep his attention away from the tunnels.”

“I’m just trying to reconcile the idea of a woman in her seventies stockpiling C4 and carrying out Fawkesian arson plots,” Georgie says.

“She was… certainly a force to be reckoned with,” Jon says. “Respected, even feared. And she managed to stay human through it all.”

“Jon,” Martin and Georgie say simultaneously, sensing his momentary shift in mood, but Jon plows ahead.

“Compared with her extensive preparations for stopping past Rituals, her attitude towards the Extinguished Sun was… restrained, almost hands-off. It was enough to raise Jonah’s

suspicions, and it led him to the same conclusions regarding the viability of standalone Ritual attempts. So instead of watching Ny-Ålesund, he was watching her – meaning he was able to intercept her in the tunnels before she could start any fires."

"And it became a murder instead of a murder-suicide," Basira says.

"Oh, she had no intention of dying," Jon says. "She planned to blind herself. Sever her connection to Jonah and the Archives so she could survive their destruction."

"What about her assistants?" Martin asks.

"She'd already lost all of her assistants by then."

"And the rest of the Institute?" Daisy asks. "Or was the 'beating heart of the Institute' thing more bullshit?"

"I'm… honestly not sure what her plan was there," Jon says slowly. "I don't know if she knew something that we don't, or – or if she thought the connection only involved the Archives staff. Either way, warning or intentionally blinding the other Institute staff would have tipped off Jonah. And she was no stranger to sacrificing innocents for the sake of a 'greater good.'" Jon traps his thumbnail between his teeth as he considers. "I suspect she would likewise be willing to sacrifice herself for a greater good, but… I don't think she was one for pointless martyrdom? I didn't – I didn't know her *personally*, but from what I do know of her… well, I doubt she would have gone down with the ship, so to speak, just to escape the guilt of being a sole survivor.

"But she never got to make that choice. Jonah murdered her, left her body in the tunnels, and… carried on scheming. He adapted his Watcher's Crown Ritual to incorporate all of the other Powers, open the door to all of them at once. But with the Eye – with *himself* at the helm, of course. He just needed an Archivist marked by all Fourteen Powers to serve as the catalyst. And he knew that someone like Gertrude would never suit his needs–

"–simply did not care about compiling experiences or collecting the fears of others. She was driven to stop those who served the powers–"

Jon shuts his eyes, grinding his teeth in frustration, and waits for the moment to pass. Over the past couple of weeks, the others have grown well-acquainted with these momentary lapses into the Archive's dialect. They've all found that most of the time, he can ride out the compulsion, given a bit of space and quiet to recompose himself in the immediate aftermath of a slip.

"I suppose I don't need to belabor the point; you're all familiar with the gist of the story by now," Jon says after a minute, barreling through the residual static clouding his thoughts. "Jonah needed a new Archivist, and I happened to fit the criteria he was selecting for." He looks down, hands clenching into fists where they rest on his knees. "Suppose he chose right. Only took a few years to mold me into what he needed me to be."

Meanwhile, Gertrude held onto her selfhood for over fifty years.

"Don't know about that," Daisy says. "Doubt he counted on you being so strong-willed that you'd go and rewrite history."

Before Jon can answer to that, before Georgie or Martin can chime in with their own reassurances, before Basira can ask the next question in her queue, a prolonged crash sounds from just upstairs, loud enough to filter through the closed trapdoor.

Immediately, Georgie is on her feet, concern clouding her expression. "I should go check on–"

She chokes on her words as a terrified shriek pierces the air.

"Georgie!"

Georgie is halfway up the ladder before anyone else can say a word.

Chapter End Notes

- GODDDD it took forever to get this chapter sorted. I have been... *extremely* distracted. By personal life things (nothing bad, just hectic), the ongoing shitshow that is American electoral politics, and current events in general. (I really need 2020 to stop escalating every other day and just… BE CHILL for the last month of its reign before we can collectively dropkick it into the abyss.)
Anyway, thank you all so much for sticking with me through my… complete lack of a consistent posting schedule these days. I'm *aiming* to have the next chapter finished before the holidays.

- Only three instances of Archive-speak this time. First and third are taken from Jiminy Maglite's statement in MAG 160. Second is from Manuela's statement in MAG 135. And a few bits of the dialogue between Jonah and Basira are borrowed/reworked from MAG 148.

- SORRYYYY FOR THE CLIFFHANGER. This might be a good time to mention that, SPOILER (for anyone who worries about major character death in fic): I have no Team Archives deaths planned for this AU. <3 <3 <3

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

Breaking Point

Chapter Summary

In which Melanie makes a choice.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings for Chapter 20: Slaughter-related imagery (war & death, graphic violence, blood/injury, infected wounds – typical Slaughter statement content, basically, but none of it happens in the present to anyone from Team Archives); a snippet of Unsettling Spider Trivia & a brief arachnophobic reaction from Jon; panic/anxiety symptoms; dissociation (& brief suicidal/self-harm ideation while dissociating); references to canon-typical trauma; discussion of blinding/eye gouging (not graphic); a bit of rejection-sensitive dysphoria from Jon; internalized victim blaming; swears; aaaaand some canon-typical Helen.

(Feel free to let me know if I missed anything. <3)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time Jon clambers out of the trapdoor on hands and knees, Basira is already down the hall and turning the corner into the assistants' office, gun in hand. Martin pulls himself up next, with Daisy bringing up the rear. He reaches down to help Jon to his feet before doing the same for Daisy. Judging from their expressions, Martin is just as surprised at the gesture as Daisy is for the assistance. For the most part, the past two weeks have done little thus far to soften Martin's impression of her.

As Jon takes a step forward, he finds himself wishing he'd opted for his cane today after all. Noticing his wince, Martin offers an arm to steady him. Jon takes it tentatively, prepared to pull back at any sign of discomfort, but when Martin doesn't flinch, Jon leans into it, taking some of the weight off his aching leg. He glances at Daisy, even more unsteady on her feet than he is, panting with exertion and leaning heavily against the wall.

"Go on," she says breathlessly, waving him on. "I'll catch up."

Jon nods and, with Martin's assistance, they make their way down the hall as quickly as possible.

The first thing he sees when he enters the room is Melanie, retreated into a corner and crushing herself into Georgie's embrace. Judging from the way Melanie is trembling, the only thing keeping her upright is Georgie's arm, looped tightly around her waist. A chair is upended near her desk, and a tower of boxes has toppled over nearby, spewing paperwork all across the floor.

Basira is in the harried process of sweeping the room: checking under desks for some hidden threat, scanning the ceiling for a hypothetical monster clinging to the tiles, inventorying drawers and filing cabinets and desks for any sign of a new addition that does not belong.

"Hey, shh, I'm here, I'm here," Georgie is murmuring into Melanie's ear, a stream of repetitive reassurances. One shaky hand strokes through Melanie's hair, and Jon suspects it's as much to calm Georgie's own nerves as it is to comfort Melanie. Georgie may not feel fear, but that does nothing to alleviate the tension and distress threatening to shatter her composure.

"Where is it?" Basira mutters to herself, eyes darting to and fro. Then, louder, sharper, adrenaline shaping the question into an order: "Melanie, what happened?"

Melanie's only response is panicked babbling, muffled as she hides her face in Georgie's jumper.

"Melanie, focus up!"

"Basira!" Georgie glowers at her. "Don't crowd her."

"I need to know if there's a threat!" Basira returns furiously.

Melanie raises her head, presumably to answer, but she struggles to form words. Georgie cups her face in one hand, encouraging her to look up.

"Shh, look at me, love, just look at me," Georgie says, fighting to maintain a soothing tone. "Are you hurt?" Melanie shakes her head *no.* "Is there something–"

Before she can finish the question, Melanie's legs crumple beneath her. Georgie catches her and eases her down to the floor, where Melanie crawls into her lap, frantic and clinging desperately.

By this time, Daisy finally makes her way into the room and quietly begins to stalk around the perimeter, peering into boxes and drawers. Jon tries to focus, to See, to Know what has Melanie so rattled, but he's distracted by his own pulse, hammering in his throat. Out of the corner of his eye, he notices Martin craning his neck to scrutinize the vents.

"Checking for flesh spiders," he says quietly in response to Jon's questioning look. "They, uh – came in through the ductwork before."

"O-oh," Jon says, wrinkling his nose. "Right."

Basira begins pacing in short bursts, swearing under her breath. Abruptly, she whirls on Jon. "What can you See?"

"I'm – I'm trying, let me…" Jon trails off, shutting his eyes and funneling all of his attention into a single question: *What is the biggest danger in this room?*

Prompt as ever, the Beholding helpfully supplies:

…the Brazilian wandering spider, of the genus Phoneutria*, is widely considered to be the most dangerous spider in the world. Although it rarely bites humans and full envenomation is uncommon, the venom of the Brazilian wandering spider is nonetheless–*

“Unless there is a *Phoneutria* specimen *in this room*,” Jon seethes through gritted teeth, realizing too late that he’s spoken the thought aloud.

“What the *hell* are you on about?” Basira demands, one hand thrown out in aggravation.

“S-sorry,” Jon says, transparently annoyed – primarily with himself. Not only is he furious with his own uselessness in a potential crisis situation, but now his easily distractible mind is being pulled in a new direction: the sudden, pressing question as to whether or not a dangerous spider *is* hiding somewhere in this room. It’s not the thing he should be focusing on, but since when has his mind ever used *reason* as a metric for ranking priorities? It’s not as if fear necessarily concerns itself with what is *rational.*

“Beholding is being – *uncooperative,* as usual,” he grumbles, trying to ignore the sensation of thousands of tiny legs skittering through his veins.

“Well, try harder,” Basira snaps, turning her back to do another investigation of the room.

Don’t take it personally, Jon tells himself, breathing through that searing, clenching sensation in his chest – an ever-predictable response to chastisement. In all likelihood, her frustration isn't centered on *him.* The fear of the unknown, the prospect of imminent danger, and a rush of adrenaline – the combination is a potent cocktail. He can’t exactly blame Basira for being on edge. He is, too.

“Okay, you’re okay,” Georgie is saying, brushing hair away from Melanie’s face, trying to get a better look at her. “Listen, can you tell me if we’re in immediate danger here? You can shake your head yes or no.”

“I – I – I – I – I–”

“Sweetheart, I need you to breathe, okay? You’re hyperventilating.”

“It’s – it’s–”

Suddenly, Jon Knows.

...a ravenous and rust-bitten blade, long-neglected and itching to steep itself in carnage: to open trenches in flesh, to saw through sinew, to carve into bone, to lodge itself in marrow ...

“Basira, you can put your gun away,” he says distantly, eyes fixed on a single point.

...to rip and tear and slice and scar and gouge and gut and claim and cut and take and feed and feed, feed, feed the sodden, gore-swamped, hungry earth…

Martin, tracking Jon’s line of sight, frowns and approaches Melanie’s desk.

...drop by delicate drop of vibrant, wasted life: cooling, congealing, choking the air with cloying iron and buzzing flies and septic bloat and rancid, maggot-ridden meat…

Martin’s scowl deepens as he reaches into the drawer. “What’s–?”

...yielding flesh marred and mutilated, pockmarked and pitted with gangrenous, yawning, weeping chasms…

“Don’t touch it!” Jon all but shouts, causing Martin to jump and pull his hand back, as if he'd just touched a hot stove.

Basira is at Martin’s side in an instant, glaring into the drawer before turning her sharp gaze on Jon.

“It belongs to the Slaughter,” Jon explains briefly before turning to Georgie. “It might be best to put some distance between–”

Georgie doesn’t need to be told twice.

“How about we move someplace else, yeah?” she says softly. Melanie takes a shuddering breath and nods vigorously, allowing Georgie to help her to her feet. Her eyes repeatedly stray to the desk drawer, pupils unnaturally dilated. Patiently, Georgie places a hand on Melanie’s cheek and guides her to look away. “Eyes on me, okay? There we are.”

“Take her to the tunnels and wait there,” Basira says, not taking her eyes off the Slaughter artefact. Georgie doesn’t respond, simply continues her whispered stream of soothing encouragement as she leads Melanie out of the room and down the hall. Basira rounds on Jon. “What is it doing here?”

“I don’t – I’m not entirely sure? I…” Jon shuts his eyes and puts a hand over his face in an attempt to block out the onslaught of nauseating sensory input: the putrid smell of muddy earth saturated with fetid blood and filth and bile. “It – it came from Artefact Storage, but I…”

“How did it get *here?”*

“I don’t *know*, Basira!” Jon takes a breath and nearly gags on the copper tang of blood on his tongue. “I’m trying to… I can’t *See,* there’s a – a – a *haze* around it–”

“–it seems the dead simply pile higher and higher on both sides, and nothing changes but the number of ghosts. And I find myself walking through the still and bloody landscape that has consumed all… if you told me I were dead, and this place my just reward, I would not for one second doubt your honesty…”

The room around him fractures and falls away, inundating his senses with the sights and sounds and smells of the trenches. The muted voices clamoring just below the threshold of his conscious awareness are unable to compete with the mayhem.

"…not for nothing do these drowned and murdered faces pursue me – looked at me with a mixture of hate and helpless terror, as though I could do something to fix it – and I wondered–"

There are hands on his shoulders. He thinks he hears someone calling his name from a distance, but he can barely hear it under the echo of his own blood thrumming in his ears, his pulse arrhythmic and frenetic as the encompassing gunfire.

"–how long it would be that I still had to wait for death–"

Waiting, wishing, willing for those strong hands to migrate to his throat, gentle touch transformed into vice grip: crush the windpipe, suffocate the words, silence the voice. Or, failing that, a Hunter's knife through the voice box: stopping the infection at its source before it could spread. Would it have been better? Would it have been just? Would it have been a mercy?

When he feels the brutal kiss of metal under his chin, he leans into it.

"I see nothing upon the horizon but more slaughter… I have nothing left, except to hope that what remains of my own life is neither long nor memorable–"

"Jon!"

In the span of a blink, the trenches are no more. There is no knife biting into Jon's throat; no fingers wrapped adamant and bruising around his neck. There are strong hands on him, yes, but they are tender where they rest, cradling both sides of his face.

"Are you alright?" Martin asks, quiet but urgent. One thumb strokes gently across Jon's cheekbone. Jon leans into that instead, eyes blinking shut. "Hey, stay with me. Can you hear me?"

“Mm. Sorry, I…” Dazed and foggy, Jon shakes his head in an attempt to jar loose his thoughts. Most of them scatter away like so many scuttling spiders, leaving him with a paltry handful of slurred syllables. “Loss. I loss–”

Jon scowls. His tongue is leaden and uncooperative, feeling unwieldy and almost alien in his mouth. It takes conscious effort to force it into the right shape.

“Lost,” he says finally, placing excessive emphasis on the *t*. He nods, satisfied with the pronunciation. “Was lost. Back now.”

“Sit down.” Martin shushes Jon with a stern look before he can protest. “Your pupils are different sizes–”

“Anisocoria,” Jon mumbles. “Happens sometimes. It’s not–”

“I want you to sit down,” Martin reiterates. It’s a familiar, commanding tone that brooks no argument, and Jon obeys with an only slightly petulant sigh.

“Did you See anything?” Basira asks.

“A long history of – of butchery.” The words run together and Jon’s eyes go unfocused again. “It’s a seventeenth-century plug bayonet. It drew its first blood at the Battle of Killiecrankie.”

A fleeting ripple of vertigo gives Jon pause. Taking advantage of his momentary disorientation, the door creaks open a little wider. As Jon loses himself in a new torrent of information, his voice takes on more and more of a distant, singsong quality.

“The soldier who wielded it felled four foes before his skull caved in under the thundercrack of an axe. He lay twitching and seizing upon the ground for an additional seventy-four seconds before he was allowed to die. The instant his killer laid eyes on the bayonet, he took it up as his own, leaving the axe buried in the corpse where it fell. He in turn slew six men and wounded thirteen before he too lay bloodless and putrefying in the muck. The blade

switched hands thirty-seven more times before the battle's end. Ever since, it has spearheaded countless acts of bloodshed: in private and in public, in homes and in bars, in the streets and on battlefields–"

"–a bayonet gouge scored through the soft and sodden mud for uncounted miles – marks the front line of a war that has no name – has always been raging, deep in the hearts of the powerful and those who thirst to see bodies piled high in their name – a thousand pointless conflicts – stitched together like a triaged chest wound – a thin and punctured membrane between the unending meat grinder and the terrified victims it longs for – and it will never stop, never be satisfied–"

An insistent patting on one side of Jon's face finally jogs him out of his reverie. He blinks rapidly several times until the world comes back into focus once again. Martin is knelt on the floor in front of him now, one palm cupping Jon's face and the other resting on his knee.

"Back with us?" Martin asks, moving both hands to Jon's shoulders, steadying him upright.

"Sorry," Jon says, ducking his head. "That was probably, um… *unpleasant* to hear."

"Anything else?" Basira asks, ignoring Martin's reproachful glare.

"Just… pointless Slaughter," Jon replies, exhaustion seeping into him. "Nothing enlightening, unless you'd like to know the body counts for the last several people to wield it. Or the blood type and precise cause of death for each of their victims."

"Fantastic," Basira mutters to herself. "And you have no idea how it got here."

"Not for certain, no. I – I have a few theories, but I can't – I'm trying, but I can't See through all the" – Jon flails one frustrated hand – "all the *noise*, all the…"

"Blood," Daisy supplies, somewhat muffled.

“Y-yeah. It’s–” Glancing in her direction, Jon sees Daisy standing rigidly with a hand clamped over her nose and mouth. “Daisy?”

“It’s *loud*. I can’t…” Daisy’s free hand dangles at her side, fingers flexing and clenching into a fist repeatedly. At the faintest touch of Basira’s hand on her shoulder, Daisy jolts away, snarling, *“Don’t touch me!”*

Almost immediately, her expression transforms into one of mortification.

“It’s fine,” Basira says, heading off an apology. “Go to the tunnels. We’ll meet you there soon.”

Daisy opens her mouth to speak, then closes it and nods stiffly. She leaves the room at a brisk pace, stumbling and whacking her shoulder against the doorframe as she goes.

“The Hunt and the Slaughter are… cousins, of a sort,” Jon says delicately.

“Yeah, I gathered,” Basira says in a clipped voice, before exhaling heavily and looking back to the open drawer. “So what do we do with it?”

“Call Artefact Storage?” Martin suggests.

“Mm. Ideally they’ll have tested protocols for handling it safely.” Jon huffs. “If we’re extremely lucky, maybe they’ll even have an idea of how to *keep* it contained this time.”

Without another word, Basira snatches the office phone off the desk and dials the extension.

Once a small team from Artefact Storage arrives to secure the bayonet, Basira takes off towards the tunnels, leaving Jon and Martin behind to facilitate the procedure.

Unfortunately, neither of them is particularly suited for that task.

Like most Institute employees, the three members of the containment crew are clearly leery of the Archives in general and of Jon especially. Jon is well aware of the myriad disturbing rumors that circulate through the Institute proper, and he finds himself missing the days when the worst of the gossip centered around the mundane: whispered commentary about his workaholic tendencies, and the subsequent conclusions people drew about his personal life outside of work; the occasional complaint about his lack of social graces, often interpreted as snobbishness; assurances to new hires that, no, it wasn't *them* – Jon Sims was just *like that.*

He wasn't particularly well-liked, but he wasn't a pariah, either. Most simply exchanged meaningful glances and shrugs when confronted with his various quirks. Some – like Tim, back before everything went wrong – met his pedantry, obsessiveness, and unintentional rudeness with longsuffering smiles and even amused affection. At the end of the day, it was the Magnus Institute: Jon was far from the only office eccentric.

Then he was promoted to Head Archivist. Everyone knew he was unqualified for the promotion; it was unsurprising that some would entertain some… *inappropriate* speculation on how he managed to secure the position. But for a long time, that was the worst of it: breakroom gossip and some uncharitable – but, in Jon's estimation, understandable – assumptions.

Since then, Jon's reputation has become downright sinister. After a visible descent into paranoia and (admittedly truthful) rumors that he was stalking his assistants, most were quick to accept it when he became a murder suspect. Even after he was cleared of suspicion, some still whispered that he was involved. It didn't help that he accumulated grievous injuries and scars like it was part of his job description – which, in some ways, he supposes it was. *Is.*

And now… well, all of those old rumors were *tame* compared to what people say about him now that he's had two assistants die on his watch; now that he's returned from the dead himself; now that a mere glimpse of his eyes is like being pinned under a microscope: vivisected, classified, and put on display like some inanimate specimen.

So, he carefully avoids eye contact when he gives his barebones explanation of the situation. Then he lapses into silence and tries to ignore the way the others scrutinize him askance as they carry out their dangerous work, eyeing him as if he's a spider they're loath to let out of sight. More than once, he has to bite his tongue against an irate remark about how they should devote their full attention to the task at hand rather than gawk at him. He just keeps reminding himself: does he *really* have any right to complain about being stared at, given what he is?

They seem only marginally less wary of Martin. Lately, he has developed a mixed reputation among the Institute staff at large. He remains half-hidden behind Jon, doing his best to render himself unobtrusive and unnoticeable – and evidently miffed at his failure to disappear entirely. He would likely be playing the wallflower even if he wasn't acutely aware of the others' judgmental stares. Although he has been less uncomfortable among Jon and the others lately, he still goes out of his way to avoid interacting with the rest of the Institute.

Eventually, the team has the bayonet wrapped and prepared for transport, and they take their leave with a bare minimum of dialogue. As much as Jon wants to ask about their plans for containing it, he'd rather not risk compelling any answers. Besides, all three are veterans in the department, and no one manages to survive Artefact Storage for more than a year without internalizing a personal policy of excessive precaution. He Knows that each of them has had their own close encounters and near misses. By now, they know better than to take shortcuts with the artefacts in their care. If anything, they're likely to err on the side of near-paranoid caution rather than allow laziness or hubris to risk another containment breach.

"That was… awkward," Martin says once he and Jon are finally – blessedly – alone.

"I wouldn't worry too much. They were just trying to decide which they should find more unsettling: standing next to a zombie," Jon quips, completely deadpan, "or the fact that said zombie may or may not have conspired to commit a brutal pipe murder."

Martin sputters with a surprised laugh. "Well… if it makes you feel any better, I don't think their opinions of me are much better? I think they're afraid of me. Like I'll – I don't know, *inform* on them or something? These days, everyone looks at me and sees Peter." Another laugh, but patently bitter this time. "More incentive to stay out of sight, I guess."

"I think they know it's more complicated than that," Jon says carefully.

“I guess,” Martin repeats, scuffing one foot against the floor and keeping his eyes downcast. “Maybe. I mean, some of them might guess I’m the reason Peter hasn’t disappeared more people, but… they don’t look at me like I’m one of them. Not anymore.” Martin shrugs, a rueful smile on his face. “My own fault, really.”

“Not your fault,” Jon replies, not missing a beat. “I doubt many of them would do much better, thrown into similar circumstances.”

“Maybe,” Martin says, clearly unconvinced. Then he shakes his head. “We should, uh – we should probably go meet up with the others? I’m… worried about Melanie.”

His inflection pitches up at the end, bending the statement into nearly a question, as if doubting his own capacity for such concern. Having suppressed the instinct for so long, Martin feels divorced from this part of himself – the worrier, the caretaker, the protector. But Jon knows from experience that the fracture will heal in time.

After all, the Martin who so unapologetically defended his own hopeless romanticism so long ago – *I want everyone to be fine, and you know what? If we were all happy, that wouldn’t actually be the end of the world!* – is the same Martin who demanded that everyone come home alive from the Unknowing in spite of the odds, who reached out through the fog to call Jon home from the depths of the Coffin, who defended the meaning of life in the face of the Vast, who ultimately chose to walk away from the Lonely time and time again.

This Martin is the same Martin who looked Jon in the eye and *insisted* that they leave the cabin and all its dead-end promises behind.

We can’t just stay here forever.

What could possibly be out there that you want to see?

A way to stop this, a way to turn the world back!

Do you really think there is one?

Well, if there is, it's not in here, is it?

Of *course* Martin is worried about Melanie. He may be out of practice, but at the end of the day, this is who he is: someone who *cares*, fiercely and doggedly, even – perhaps especially – when the world tells him he shouldn't.

"Come on," Jon says with a nod and a smile that he hopes is reassuring.

He looks away as he extends one hand: an open but discreet invitation. After a few seconds pass, Jon is just about to withdraw the offer – and then Martin's hand slips into his. His touch is tentative and cold and *almost* ghostlike, but undeniably present all the same. Jon allows himself a small, private smile as he laces their fingers together – leaving his grip loose enough to offer Martin an easy out should he need it – but otherwise doesn't draw attention to it as they set off down the hallway toward the trapdoor.

Of course, Jon thinks to himself when he sees the bright yellow door boldly claiming real estate on the tunnel wall. Martin echoes the thought with a hand to his forehead and a muttered, "It's never just *one* thing, is it?"

The air is charged and crackling with tension. Georgie is seated on the floor, Melanie folded into her lap and looking smaller than Jon has ever seen her. Basira stands in front of them, taut and bristling. And hovering vulture-like nearby…

"Oh! Hello, Archivist."

Jon's tired sigh must convey his opinion well enough, because Helen's wide grin transforms into a plastered-on pout.

“You too?” she says. “What, am I not allowed to check in on a friend in distress?”

Judging from Georgie’s wary, disapproving expression, she’s no more convinced by Helen’s show of concern than Jon is.

“Read the damn room,” Daisy growls through clenched teeth. She looks about ready to pounce, standing near the base of the ladder with her fingers twitching at her sides. Her eyes are locked onto Helen, tracking each and every subtle movement.

“Helen,” Jon says evenly, “would you mind giving us some privacy?”

Helen cackles, sending pins and needles prickling up and down Jon’s spine. “That’s a funny request, coming from *you*.”

“Please,” Jon says, too exhausted for pride or retort.

“How uncharacteristically polite.” Helen laughs again, delighted. Jon just gives her a pointed stare. *“Fine,”* she sighs dramatically. “I’ll come back later.”

With that, she flounces towards her door, unnecessarily scraping her long, knifelike fingers against the tunnel wall as she goes. It produces a prolonged nails-on-chalkboard screech, punctuated by her door summarily slamming behind her.

“Well,” Georgie says. “She’s…”

“A garish, technicolor headache?” Jon suggests, already wincing against the sharp pain clustering behind his eyes.

“Something like that,” Georgie replies with a short laugh.

Jon drops heavily into the nearest chair, fatigue and the persistent ache in his leg overcoming him. Martin takes his cue and takes a seat next to him, but Basira remains standing, still on edge. Daisy as well, though after a minute, she has to lean against the ladder for support.

"Helen's not that bad," Melanie mumbles, raising her head to look up at Georgie with bleary, reddened eyes.

"I don't trust her," Basira says flatly. "Isn't deception her whole deal?"

"She *did* help us before, though," Martin says uncertainly. "With the Flesh. She didn't have to do that, you know?"

Basira looks to Jon, crossing her arms. "Well? Any insight from the all-knowing time traveler?"

Jon sighs, rubbing his temple with one hand, the other toying with the end of his scarf.

"Helen… plays her own game," he hedges. "She has ulterior motives."

"Most people do," Melanie says.

"That's true," Jon concedes. "But Helen is part of the Spiral – *Es Mentiras,* 'It Is Lies.' She feeds on… well, gaslighting. Forcing people to question their reality, their judgment, their own senses. Just as much as I feed on statements. We… well, we are what we are." Jon pauses, struggling with his wording. "And… I don't actually know how much of Helen Richardson is *left?* Her becoming was – different from mine. The corridors sort of… *ate* her? And she *became* them. Became the Distortion – or, the Distortion became her, or…" Jon shakes his head. "It's – it deliberately eludes any clear definition; the truth is impossible to pin down, by design. The point is, I don't know that Helen is an Avatar so much as…"

“A monster?” Basira says.

“W-well, Avatars could be considered monsters, too, I suppose. Hell, there are *humans* who could be called monsters. And arguably – arguably, ‘Avatar’ isn’t necessarily a coherent *thing* in the first place.” Jon scowls and starts gesticulating with his hands, growing increasingly heated as he speaks. “It’s not an *a priori* aspect of reality, it’s just a – it’s just a *word,* another way for us to try to – I don’t know, *make sense* of the world, force reality into – into easily-digestible boxes, to impose simplistic definitions onto concepts that don’t *have* clear boundaries. I mean – once I opened the door, there *was* more of a binary – Watcher versus Watched – but here, now? It’s more – it’s *fuzzier,* it’s–”

“Jon,” Georgie says gently. Jon stops abruptly, and in the quiet he finally notices his breathless panting.

“Sorry,” he sighs. “Got a bit – worked up, there. I just mean – *this* Helen is the Distortion. I don’t know if she’s more analogous to a human-turned-Avatar, or if she’s closer to something like the NotThem, or the Anglerfish, or any number of things that… were never human to begin with. And – and in a way, Helen *is* her corridors, which – also makes her similar to the Coffin? Sort of? But–” Jon shakes his head. “None of that really *matters.* The point is, Helen is as complicated as any human.”

“So what does she want?” Basira asks.

“I don’t think she has a precise *goal* – at least not right now. Eventually, when the time comes for another attempt at the Great Twisting, I imagine she’ll work towards that, but as of now?” He shrugs. “I think she’s just… curious, and keen on having a front-row seat to whatever happens. She’s having fun, and staving off boredom, and supplementing her diet with whatever anxiety she can pull from us as an added bonus.”

Basira paces a few steps to the left, rubbing her forehead as she thinks. “You don’t think she’ll work with Jonah?”

“No,” Jon says. “She didn’t last time, at least. Not *directly*. But… her loyalties don’t lie with us, either. When it came time to choose between helping me and – and standing by and watching Jonah win? She chose the latter.”

“Did she know what he was planning?” Basira asks.

“Not… *exactly.* She had her suspicions, but she didn’t know the details. She just knew that she would have more fun if he succeeded. And,” he adds with unbridled vitriol, “she always did like watching me scurry around making a mess of things.”

“Sounds like you have a grudge,” Daisy remarks.

“I mean, I sort of do.” Daisy raises her eyebrows in an unspoken question, and Jon sighs. “Before the end – Martin was in danger, and I needed help, I – I *begged* her to help, and she just… laughed at me. And after the end, she continued a campaign of – petty harassment and gloating. And – and then, after…” Jon swallows. “Just – she was the only one I had to *talk* to for… I don’t even know how long – *too* long, and in all that time, she *never* lost her ability to get under my skin. I was an endless source of entertainment for her, and I still am. So, yes, I’m resentful, and no, I don’t trust her. I feel… guilty for what happened to her – and I *am* thankful that she helped during the Flesh’s assault – but… she’s not a friend. Or an ally.”

He glances at Melanie in an attempt to glean her reaction to his rant, but she has her face pressed into Georgie’s jumper again.

“So she’s a wild card,” Basira says.

“Yes,” Jon says firmly. “She’s… capricious. She’ll always do what feels right to her, and what feels right to her is… well, whatever seeds the most doubt. The only reliable thing about her is deception.”

“Figures,” Basira scoffs.

“Is it gone?” Georgie asks abruptly. “The… whatever it was, upstairs?”

“It was an antique bayonet,” Jon says. “Touched by the Slaughter. It’s been returned to Artefact Storage, though they, ah – they didn’t seem to have any answers as to how it ended up in Melanie’s desk. None that they cared to share with me, anyway.”

“Can’t you just…” Basira makes a vague hand gesture. “You know – Ask?”

“I couldn’t – well, I *could,* but I… they’re already afraid of me.” Jon shrugs. “I didn’t want to validate their fears.”

He can see the muscles in Basira’s jaw working as she grinds her teeth.

“Jon,” she says tightly, “no offense, but – your priorities are out of order. There could be something they’re not telling us. For all we know, one of them could be working with Magnus. We need to know the truth, and if that means making someone a little uncomfortable, that doesn’t seem like an unreasonable sacrifice to me.”

“Look, I–” Jon takes a steadying breath. “I’m either an ally or an asset. A person, or a monster. You can’t have both, and this time around, I’d rather stay… well, *me.*” He looks away, his voice growing quiet. “Assuming that’s even an option, anyway. I’d… I would like it to be.”

“It doesn’t have to be all-or-nothing,” Basira retorts. “It’s not that simple–”

“That’s not what you said last time,” Jon says bitterly. He can feel his cheeks burning with shame. After all, does he really have any right to hold a grudge? *This* Basira wasn’t the one who gave him that ultimatum. And even if she was… can he really blame her, given what he was doing at the time?

“This isn’t like last time–”

“And *I don’t want it to be!”*

Jon cringes at the strident sound of his own voice echoing down the tunnel. Everyone is staring at him now, even Melanie. He shuts his eyes against their scrutiny. A long moment of silence passes before Basira releases a heavy sigh.

"Fine," she says coolly. "You mentioned you have some theories of your own?"

"A few," Jon says, more subdued now. "Could've been Jonah working through someone else. Could've been the Web pulling the strings. Or Peter, playing his own game. Or – or Helen having a laugh, though I doubt it. It could even be a property of the artefact itself. I don't *think* it has the ability to – to teleport to the nearest person who might be susceptible to its compulsion, or manipulate someone to transport it to where it wants to be, but – it wouldn't be all that surprising." Jon sighs. Some of his hair has fallen loose from his messy ponytail, and he busies himself tucking it behind his ear, still averting his eyes as he speaks. "But… I think the most likely scenario is Jonah. I imagine he was disappointed about Melanie's recovery, and this is a backup plan to orchestrate the mark of the Slaughter."

Melanie barks out a humorless laugh, high-pitched and frayed.

"I'm sorry, Melanie," Jon says quietly, riddled with guilt. "I, uh… I think he was hoping that exposure to the bayonet would trigger a relapse."

"I'm so – so fucking *tired* of this place, of all the *bullshit,* I can't–" Melanie makes a strangled, frustrated noise, almost a cry. *"Fuck."*

With a heartbroken expression on her face, Georgie wraps an arm around Melanie, pulls her close in a firm embrace, and rests her chin on her head. It's a position Jon recognizes: it's how he always likes to be held, when the world around him starts to unravel, sweeping him along with it. Georgie was the first person to ever introduce him to that comfort – something he never would have asked for on his own, something he never would have even *thought* to ask for, but the sense of security it offered felt almost magical.

The gesture seemed just as intuitive for Martin; Jon didn't even have to state that preference. Even now, the sense-memory is vivid – like being swathed in a heated, weighted blanket, just the right amount of encompassing pressure to hold him together, making it feel safe to *relax*

without the risk of shattering into pieces. It takes a few seconds for Jon to realize that he's hugging his own sides – an unconscious attempt to simulate the experience. It's a poor substitute, and the discrepancy only makes him feel more deprived. For a feverish, touch-starved moment, Jon can't help but envy Melanie. He immediately kicks himself, feeling self-centered.

After a few seconds, some of Melanie's tension melts away. She takes a breath, steels herself, and states, clearly and firmly: "I want out."

"You're quitting," Basira says, her eyes widening slightly in astonishment.

Melanie remains in Georgie's lap, but twists to face the others.

"I mean, what else is there? It's not like Jon's going to die on us – not that I want you to," she adds hurriedly, throwing a glance in his direction. She relaxes when his only reaction is a partly amused, partly abashed smirk. "And – I mean, unless we can kill Elias…?"

"I… don't know if that would release me. Which means it might not release you, either." Jon pauses, gnawing on his lip. "And… there *is* the matter of him being the 'beating heart of the Institute.'"

"So he wasn't lying about that," Melanie says sullenly.

"I don't think so. Not *entirely,* anyway. It's possible that it's more complicated than he let on, but I don't know for certain. The Eye wasn't exactly forthcoming about that sort of thing, even when I was still, ah…"

"Post-apocalyptic Google?" Georgie suggests. Jon can tell that she was aiming for playful, but judging from the slight waver in her voice, he suspects that she's struggling to keep a tight rein on her emotions.

“More or less,” Jon says. “Anyway, there’s a strong possibility that he wasn’t lying, in which case… killing him isn’t a risk worth taking.”

“How are we supposed to stop him, then?” Martin asks with a nervous laugh. “I mean, if we – what if we – if we blinded him, what then?”

“It would sever his connection to the Beholding, I assume.” Jon furrows his brow as he considers the question. “In theory.”

Daisy finally speaks up, an intense look in her eye. “Would that have the same effect as killing him?”

“I’m… not certain. I wonder if blinding him is even *possible* – he could be protected from it in much the same way that I am. I wish I knew.” Jon scoffs, kicking halfheartedly at the floor. “Or *Knew.*”

“So right now the only plan is to just… hold him off indefinitely,” Melanie says. “No end in sight.”

“Right,” Jon says, a familiar, heartwrenching dread creeping up on him. “I, ah – I can’t guarantee your freedom anytime soon. Or at all, really.”

Melanie nods. “In that case… I don’t think I can afford to hold off forever, waiting for a miracle that might not happen. This place is evil, and staying here, doing what *it* wants – it makes me feel *complicit*, and I–” She cuts herself off, casting a contrite glance in Jon’s direction. “I…”

“It’s okay,” he says with a rueful smile. “I know what you meant.”

“I know that you don’t have the same out,” Melanie says quietly, looking away. “That you’d take it if you did. But… but *I* do. If I have the option to – to take back control of my life, to

get out, then…" She releases a heavy exhale and looks up again to meet Jon's eyes. "I think I have to take it. I can't be a part of this anymore."

"I know," Jon says.

Georgie combs her fingers through Melanie's hair, prompting Melanie to face her again.

"You're sure?" Georgie asks.

Melanie closes her eyes, takes a deep breath in – then releases it slowly. When she opens her eyes again, her expression is one of certainty and determination.

"I'm sure," she says with a resolute nod. "I've made up my mind."

For a long minute, Georgie simply stares into Melanie's eyes, studying her intently.

"Okay," Georgie says weakly. She clears her throat, breaking into a watery smile and forcing reassurance into her voice. "Okay."

She presses Melanie close to her again, and Melanie goes willingly, slackening fully now. Now that her choice has been made, it's as if an oppressive burden has been lifted. Her sense of relief is nearly palpable, and Jon, despite the ache he feels at not having the same option, will not begrudge her for reclaiming her life.

Chapter End Notes

- Shorter chapter than usual this time! This felt like a good place to end for now. Might not be able to update again before the holidays, but we'll see. c:

- re: Helen – given that this AU is canon divergent wrt Helen as of MAG 187, I decided to have Jon still be a little on the fence about her. He doesn't trust her or see her as a

friend, but he also isn't 100% certain of exactly what she is now (i.e. whether there's still something 'human' to her or not), and he still harbors guilt about Helen Richardson's fate in general, which ofc complicates things.

- Citations for Archive-speak are as follows: MAG 105 (x4); 163. Martin's 'I want everyone to be fine' quote is from MAG 79, and the flashback dialogue btwn Jon & Martin re: the cabin is from MAG 161.

- Also, still haven't replied to comments from the last chapter (planning on getting to it over the next couple days) but generally speaking: the reviews are IN and apparently we are all agreed that Jonah Magnus is a slimeball with a *very* punchable face.

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

Respite

Chapter Summary

In which the archival staff enjoy some quality time on the eve of Melanie's departure.

Chapter Notes

Also: WTGFs can have some unrepentant PDA, as a treat.

CWs for Chapter 21: spiders/arachnophobia/Web-related themes/imagery; dissociation/drdp; a bit of Jon-typical self-loathing/blame; restrictive dieting/disordered eating themes wrt statement consumption (including associating eating with failure/guilt); allusion to police violence (i.e. Daisy's past actions; not detailed or graphic); very brief mention of Flesh-typical imagery; referenced eye horror & extensive discussion of eye-gouging/blinding (but no onscreen graphic self-harm); alcohol consumption (in a group setting); swears.
Let me know if I missed anything!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"We all have forces that drive us, circumstances that direct us, and even if we choose to ignore these and act against all logic, just to prove that we can *– is that not simply allowing the existential terror of our own powerlessness to control us instead?"*

Under the dampening layer of white noise droning at the forefront of Jon's mind, the singsong rhythm of the statement reverberates in the chill air of the tunnels.

"Most of one's life is simply spent looking back and convincing yourself that you chose deliberately to act like you did."

The Archivist's inhale crackles with static.

"Have you ever read War and Peace, *Jon?"* A pause; another buzzing hiss of a breath. *"Its central thesis is that the tiniest, most insignificant factors can control the destiny of the world. In its post-script, Tolstoy muses on the concept of free will, on whether or not* he *really believes in it. He ultimately decides that if all the millions upon millions of factors that weigh upon our choices were fully and completely known, then all could be foreseen and predetermined. But, he argues, it is quite impossible for the human mind to comprehend even a fraction of these. And in that vast, dark space of ignorance lies free will."*

A vacant smile: invisible strings tugging at the corners of a mouth-become-mouthpiece.

"Isn't that marvelous, Jon? Free will is simply ignorance. It's just the name we give to the fact that no one can ever really see everything that controls them. Of course, that's not the real crux of the free will question that's bothering you at the moment, is it? I think that one probably comes down to whether or not you're choosing *to continue reading this statement–"*

"Jon!"

The world rushes back in loud and blinding. It hits Jon like a blast, leaving him reeling and sputtering. When his vision clears and the crunching, trilling static subsides, Daisy is standing before his makeshift desk, bracing herself with one hand on the tabletop and all of her weight on her better leg.

At first glance, the expression on her face is unreadable; the piercing look in her eye, almost intimidating. But by now, Jon recognizes her mien as one of concern: intense and sharp-edged as the rest of her, but with a ferocity born of an instinct to protect rather than the urge to overpower. Having experienced both sides of her, Jon can discern the difference between a measured gaze that sees *pack* and a calculating glare that sees *prey.*

"Didn't mean to scare you," she says, lowering her volume. "I was saying your name and you weren't answering."

"How, uh, h-how–" Jon stutters to a halt, still feeling like a floating afterimage of himself. He struggles to swallow around the nauseating sensation of cobwebs plastered to the roof of his mouth *(not real not real not real);* punches through the illusory viscous snarl, excessive force

meeting nothing at all and pushing the syllables careening off a parched and clumsy tongue: **“How long have you been standing there?”**

Too late, he becomes conscious of the telltale tingling on his lips.

“Couple minutes,” Daisy answers promptly, blinking dazedly a few times once the words leave her mouth.

“Damn,” Jon hisses, shutting his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. The slip-up isn’t all that surprising, given he’s still coming down from a statement recitation, with part of him still loitering in that trancelike headspace. Moreover, he’s *hungry,* and the hunger can have a way of making the compulsion more difficult to control. *Should’ve known; should’ve been more careful.* “I’m sorry, Daisy, I didn’t mean–”

Daisy only shakes her head and then, as if nothing untoward occurred, she continues: “Thought you were recording a statement at first, but… it didn’t look like you were reading from anything?”

“No,” Jon sighs, “I wasn’t.”

Over the past few days – ever since Basira helped him set up this makeshift workspace down here in the tunnels – Jon had become… not *complacent,* per se, but less anxious about reading without supervision. Now, though, the incident with the Slaughter’s blade has reawakened his previous fears. If Jonah *was* in any way responsible for the appearance of the artefact, what’s to say he couldn’t choreograph a bait-and-switch from a distance, replacing one of Jon’s vetted, stockpiled statements with something far more ruinous?

Sure, if Jonah is still trying to orchestrate marks, it means he isn’t yet aware that his Archive is complete and equipped to fulfill the Ritual. But it’s only a matter of time, right? And Jonah can leave his prison cell any time he wants, can’t he? It was foolish for Jon to ever let his guard down in the first place, even marginally. He hasn’t dared to read a statement – or anything else, for that matter – since yesterday. Not without safeguards.

Daisy is watching him patiently, waiting for elaboration.

“It was a statement that Annabelle left for me last time. I don’t have a written copy of it anymore, but it’s still up here,” Jon says tiredly, tapping his temple with an index finger. “As much a taunt as it was a statement. Meant to encourage doubt.”

Not a difficult feat, really. He’s spent most of his life mired in the Web, terrified by all it represents. It was his first mark, perhaps the deepest and most insidious of the lot.

That sense-memory never faded. It was as if the veins and sinew of him all turned to spider silk: puppet strings prickling with the whisper of countless skittering, agile legs. Sometimes he can still feel the crawling, the impression of being tugged onward by a thousand minds, none of them his own. Only a tactile hallucination, he tells himself each time it happens – the fabrication of a post-traumatic mind. But every time, he can’t help wondering whether that’s as weak a rationalization as all those he trotted out in service of his feigned skepticism so long ago.

Lurking in a shadowy corner of his mind is the enduring, corrosive question: What if the strings only went slack for the time being? He’s never stopped waiting for the moment when they might be pulled taut once again and that lifelong dread would be confirmed: *the Spider never really let go.*

It was the first time he experienced that sickening sensation of being a passenger in his own body, but it was far from the last. And that watershed instant when he started to read the book, when he realized he could not *stop* reading – it’s a memory echoed and reinforced each time he succumbs to the compulsion of a statement. Whether the Spider pulls his strings or not, the *possibility* will always haunt him – and in a way, true to Annabelle’s words, that fear is just as effective at influencing him as direct manipulation would be.

“The Spider has always been something of a weak spot for me,” Jon says distractedly. “Even now, I don’t Know how much of what Annabelle says is true. The Web is inscrutable by nature. I never could See through it, even when the Eye was at its pinnacle.”

“Hmm.” Daisy nudges a chair closer to Jon’s desk and takes a seat. As is her way, she doesn’t bother with subtlety or pretense when she changes the subject. “What are you drawing, anyway?”

“Drawing?” Jon frowns, staring down at the pen in his hand as if taking it in for the first time. Then he sees the confused, weblike tangle of scribbles sprawling across the sheet of paper in front of him. “Oh, for the love of–” Disgusted, he drops the pen and pushes the paper away from him roughly. “Can’t have *five minutes* to–”

“Jon?”

“Nothing, I was just–” Jon breathes a clipped sigh, boiling frustration warring with tired resignation. “Melanie made copies of her therapy workbook the other day.” He nods at a stack of papers on his desk. *Eighteen-point-two centimeters tall,* the Beholding informed him earlier, entirely unsolicited, and now the figure pings in his mind every time he glimpses the pile. “She recommended I give it a try.”

And when he asked her to proofread for him earlier this morning – to double-check that none of the pages he wanted to look at had been replaced or altered in any way overnight – she did so without demanding an explanation.

“Workbook?” Daisy repeats, eyebrows raised. “More like a tome.”

“Oh, the book itself is only thirty-three pages. Melanie accidentally punched in an extra zero when she was copying one of the pages. Said she considered canceling the job, but the idea of providing therapy tools at the Institute’s expense was too appealing to pass up. So she repeated the process.” A small, wry smile crosses Jon’s face. “Several times.”

“Good for her.” Daisy leans forward, peering curiously at the top sheet. “What, uh – what sort of exercises?”

“Cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness, mostly,” he mumbles, looking down at his fidgeting hands.

It’s not that he considers himself above therapy, per se. It’s just that the prospect of shining a spotlight on the most raw and vulnerable parts of him – of drawing all of his fears and weaknesses to the surface to be picked apart, to be *seen* is… well, harrowing. He spent most of his life vocally, almost cartoonishly denying the existence of the supernatural, clinging to

the idea that refusing to outwardly acknowledge the monsters of the world would somehow conceal him from their notice. Deep down, he knew that he was only fooling himself – that the scant sense of security it conjured was a brittle illusion – but a maladaptive defense mechanism was better than none at all.

Even now, hiding is a difficult habit to break. Scrutinizing the origins of that habit is an ordeal all on its own.

"The one I was working on was for identifying triggers," he says, smothering the instinctive reticence that bubbles up at the admission.

"And?"

"I wrote 'spiders,' and then *that* happened," he says sullenly, jerking his chin at the vandalized worksheet. "Didn't even notice I was doing it. *Or* that I was recounting Annabelle's statement."

"And you think it was the Web."

"I don't know. Maybe. It could just be my subconscious. But I don't *know*, and isn't that the rub?" Jon laughs, beleaguered and bitter. "Either way, I'm sure Annabelle would get a kick out of it. That *was* the crux of her statement. The nature of free will; whether it exists at all. The uncertainty as to whether, when, and to what extent your actions are your own. The terror of being controlled by something else, or being unable to control yourself, and not being able to tell the difference–"

"–the Mother is the fear of manipulation and lost control made manifest. So perhaps it is our fear that projects her influence on everything that happens. Like the mind: retrospectively assigning reason to our actions, so we fit whatever occurs into the nearest pattern we can, and declare her web both intricate and complete. Perhaps she is no more active than Terminus, simply sitting and reveling in the inevitable cascade of paranoia, as those who hold her in special terror cocoon themselves in red string and theory. Or perhaps I am simply telling you what you need to hear in order to ensure you behave exactly as the Mother wish–"

Jon's narration screeches to a halt when a crumpled-up ball of paper glances off the side of his head. When his vision refocuses, he sees Daisy staring back at him, eyebrows raised.

“Thanks,” he mutters.

“Figured you didn’t need that worksheet,” Daisy says with a cavalier shrug. “And I think that’s enough moping for one morning.”

“I’m not *moping–”*

“Time to eat.”

“What?” Jon can feel the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. He doesn’t want to examine whether the spark that courses through him is more of an apprehensive shiver or an eager thrill. “No.”

“Yes. You promised last night that you’d have a statement today.”

“I’ll have one tonight.”

“No, you’ll have one now.” Daisy silences him with a glare when he opens his mouth to argue. “You’re cranky, twitchy, and you haven’t eaten in over two weeks. You need a Snickers, Sims.”

For one seething, mutinous moment, Jon is torn between lashing out and storming off. Instead, he slouches in his seat, crossing his arms. *Like a toddler refusing to eat his greens,* he thinks scathingly – and just like that, the fight goes out of him. He shuts his eyes and throws his head back with a wearied groan. *“Fine.*”

“Good.” Daisy leans over to snag a nearby empty chair, drags it closer to her, and gingerly props her bad leg up on it, settling in. “So… how do you want to do this?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I have quite a few stories I could tell. Do you have a… hm.” She looks up at the ceiling as she deliberates. “I don’t know, a preference?”

“You mean am I in the mood for a particular flavor of horror?” Jon deadpans. “Pick my poison of the day?”

One side of Daisy’s mouth turns up, but she doesn’t laugh – likely remembering how he reacted the last time she tried to make light of his feeding habits.

“I mean, I really can write up a list of potential statements, if you want,” she says blandly, testing the waters. Her eyes are locked onto him, inspecting for microexpressions. “Give you a selection to choose from.”

“You’re a menace,” Jon says with an amused huff.

Brightening at his more positive reception, Daisy forges ahead.

“I’ll take that as a yes. So: I have some of the standard fare – vampires, evil mannequins, and such. Or I was thinking I could tell you about this one shady auction we had to clean up after – they had to call in hazmat teams and everything.” She scoffs. “Don’t know what the rich assholes expected, really, messing with that stuff. All the lots were things like cursed heirloom jewelry and creepy antiques. There was a hand of glory that never burned out, and a few Leitners, and a mirror that showed a person’s reflection in different stages of decay – I remember it had an engraving that said *‘memento mori,’* so it’s probably safe to assume it belonged to the End. Oh, and there was an armchair made of skin – it had a pulse and bled when cut and everything–”

“Eugh.”

“Yeah, yeah – but maybe we can squeeze a few statements out of that one auction, so don’t knock it.” Daisy extends her better leg to nudge his foot with hers. She pulls it back before he can give her a return kick, snickering when he scowls at her. “I could also tell you about this… I don’t know – the primary witness described it as ‘a swarm of bees in a trenchcoat’? Most of that story is secondhand, though; I only saw the aftermath. What else…” She snaps her fingers. *“Oh,* the spider husks–”

Her jaw snaps shut just after the words leave her mouth, glancing at Jon to gauge his reaction.

“I never want to hear the words ‘spider husks’ ever again,” he says. He manages to keep his tone light and half-joking, but it’s undercut slightly by the waver in his voice.

“Guess we’ll save that one for last, then.”

“When I request a statement about spiders,” he says drily, “assume I’ve been replaced by the Stranger, or I’m being puppeted by the Web, or else am on the verge of starvation with no other option.” Daisy chuckles again. “Which… I suppose will be the case at some point–”

“O–kay,” Daisy interrupts, drawing out the first vowel, “enough with the brooding. Storytime, Sims. Either you pick your poison or I will.”

“Not spiders.” Jon pauses, trying to construct a tactful way to phrase his second request. “I would also prefer to avoid statements where you were the, ah…”

“The perpetrator.”

“Yeah,” he says, shifting uncomfortably. “I know beggars can’t be choosers, but so long as there are alternatives…” He shrugs, averting his eyes. “Honestly, I’d rather you tell me about the spiders. It’s just–”

“You don’t have to explain. Or sugarcoat it,” she adds, noting his uneasy expression. “I know what I was. What I am; what all I’ve done.” A pause. “You Know, too, don’t you?”

“Yes. I… Saw a lot of it, at the end.”

Daisy nods. “So don’t spare me the discomfort of having it acknowledged.” She sighs. “That said, a lot of my statement fodder has some element of the Hunt. I can start with the ones that don’t, but eventually there’ll be slim pickings.”

“I know,” Jon sighs, looking down at his hands and picking absently at warped, burned flesh.

“Guess we can cross that bridge when we come to it. For now…” Daisy takes a calming breath, rolls her shoulders, and cracks her neck before settling back in her chair. “You ready?”

Jon can already feel himself lapsing into a detached haze. When he raises his head to look at her, the tunnel vision sets in: all of his attention hones in on the promise of a statement, unblinking eyes riveted on its source. From somewhere amongst the mismatched clutter of recorders in the vicinity, an audible click sounds out, followed by the steady, eager purr of spooling tape.

“Ask me,” Daisy says, and it’s all the prompting the Archivist needs.

“Statement of Alice ‘Daisy’ Tonner, regarding… one of her experiences as a Sectioned officer.” The command fizzes seltzer-like on his tongue, leaving a tingling numbness in its wake. “Statement begins.”

“I know the library has at least one bookbinding awl upstairs.”

Tossing a stress ball into the air repeatedly and speaking in a tone one might use to discuss dinner options, Melanie seems far too blasé for a person outlining methods of self-mutilation.

"You're… awfully casual about this," Jon says.

"Well, I've already made my decision. No point agonizing over it anymore." She catches the ball and crushes it in one fist until her knuckles go white, belying her otherwise calm demeanor. A moment later, though, some of the tension drains away. "Georgie asked me to move in with her. I'm pretty familiar with the layout of her flat at this point, and she's okay with making modifications to make it more, um… accessible. Not just *okay* with it, she's…" A shy smile crosses Melanie's face. "She seems… I don't know – enthusiastic about it."

"I'm happy for you." Melanie narrows her eyes at him, and he frowns. "What?"

"You know, I can never tell if you're being sarcastic."

"Yes, well," Jon says, rolling his eyes, "just then I was being sincere. I'm happy for you," he repeats adamantly. *"Both* of you."

Melanie hums. "Well, thanks."

"Now I can't tell if *you're* being sarcastic."

"And you never will," Melanie returns. "Anyway – thoughts?"

"Hm?"

"On the awl. I'd ask Georgie for her opinion, but, well – she's already upset over the whole thing, you know?" Melanie twirls a lock of hair around her finger, eyebrows drawing together with worry. "I can tell she's trying to hold it together, but…"

“I know,” Jon says, a bit guiltily. “It’s… a lot.”

“Yeah.” A pause. “How’d I do it last time?”

“Oh, you, uh – you went with the awl.”

“And it went… well?”

“I mean, it did the job,” Jon says with a nervous chuckle. “Your therapist wasn’t thrilled about it – you implied that she wanted you hospitalized long-term, but you were allowed to go home with Georgie in the end. I’m sure your recovery couldn’t have been easy, but… I don’t think you regretted it. When I last saw you – it was brief, but you seemed to be adjusting. Healing. You told me you weren’t scared anymore, and you looked… I don’t know. At peace, I suppose.”

“I am at peace, I think, with the outcome. Just not looking forward to the *process.*” She grimaces. “I guess it doesn’t really matter what I use, though, does it? It’s going to hurt either way.”

“You could go the chemical route,” Jon says delicately. “If you do, I would go with an alkali – it’ll be more effective than an acid. More likely to, ah… finish the job. But you might damage more than your eyes that way.”

“Shame there isn’t an impending solar eclipse I can go stare at.”

“Quite. Suppose you could go stare at the sun – or any ultraviolet light source, really, but that might be more of a process than just…” Jon waves his hand uncertainly.

“Stabbing,” Melanie says bluntly.

Jon breathes an uneasy laugh. “To the point, huh?”

“Was that a *joke?”*

“What?” Jon replays the words in his mind, then cringes. “Oh, uh – that was unintentional.”

“You’ve been spending too much time with Daisy. Never would’ve thought she’s one for puns.” Melanie leans back in her chair, folding her arms, flexing her fist around the stress ball. For a minute she mulls over her thoughts before blurting out, “Should I be worried about Elias?”

“Hard to say,” Jon says, scratching at his jaw. “I think maybe you should avoid talking about your plans outside of the tunnels, at least. Last time, I’d already received the Slaughter mark by the time you chose to quit, but now…”

“He still has a use for me,” Melanie guesses, disgusted.

“Yes,” Jon says apologetically. “I don’t know when you plan to do it, but maybe don’t make any obvious preparations that might clue him in ahead of time. Best not give him an opening to intervene.”

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

“Once you’ve quit, though, you should be safe. He’s cruel, but he prefers to exercise that cruelty in pursuit of his goals. If you remove yourself from the game board, he’ll likely cut his losses and start formulating a new plan of attack. I doubt he’ll go out of his way to make your life miserable if it won’t serve a practical purpose.”

“Will he still be able to… you know, *See* me?”

“I’m not entirely certain. During the apocalypse, I couldn’t See you or Georgie. You were a… a blind spot of sorts, no matter where you went. I assume it was a combination of Georgie’s immunity to fear and your own severance from the Eye. All I Knew is that you were alive and together. Granted, Jonah’s powers are different from mine. He can See through any eye, even an image, so he might be able to spy on you through photographs, or other people. Or,” Jon adds with unbridled vitriol, “even the Admiral.”

“If he so much as *looks* at the Admiral,” Melanie says darkly.

“Agreed,” Jon says, not joking in the least. “Seeing takes effort, though. I don’t think he’ll exert himself trying to surveil you, once you’re no longer a viable pawn. I would continue to avoid discussing certain topics outside of the tunnels – just to be safe – but… I think he’ll be too busy keeping tabs on the Institute to Watch you, for the most part.”

“Here’s hoping.”

“Have you decided–” Jon stalls, wary of asking the question directly. The Archivist may be freshly sated, but the accidental compulsion incident from Daisy’s visit earlier still has him on edge. “I was wondering when you’re planning on going through with it.”

“Tomorrow,” Melanie says, subdued.

“O-oh. That’s… fast.”

“No point in putting it off, right? I think the longer I wait, the more I’ll dread it. And I’d rather not risk another incident like yesterday, you know?”

“Yeah,” Jon says quietly.

“Georgie’s going to stay here tonight. In the morning, I’ll go steal an awl from the library.” A faint smirk breaks through the solemnity of the moment. “I bet Elias is going to *hate* me not giving my two weeks’ notice.”

“The man loves scheduling, pomp, and red tape,” Jon says, offering a weak smile in return. “Of *course* he will.”

“So, is this how you expected to spend your thirtieth birthday?” Georgie asks, tipping more wine into Melanie’s proffered mug. “Drinking cheap alcohol out of chipped mugs in some creepy murder tunnels with your cursed coworkers and your girlfriend?”

“The girlfriend is a surprise,” Melanie drawls. Georgie snorts and leans into her a bit too forcefully, causing some of the wine to slosh over the rims of both of their mugs when their shoulders bump. The subtle blush splashed across Melanie’s cheekbones darkens.

“Can’t believe you’re gouging your eyes out on your birthday,” Daisy says, just before taking a generous swig directly from her own bottle of scotch. Despite having downed three-quarters already, she isn’t even tipsy.

“Day *after* my birthday, technically. And as far as gifts go, getting away from this place will be a wish come true.”

Georgie catches Jon’s eye, tilting the wine bottle in her hand from side to side. “Refill?”

“Not right this moment,” Jon says. He’s only on his second glass – or mug, rather – but he can already feel the flush creeping up his neck, the warmth pooling in his cheeks. A pleasant buzz is settling over him like a blanket, smoothing out the jagged edges of his thoughts.

“Martin?” Georgie brandishes the bottle in his direction, giving it a little shake.

“No, uh – I’m alright,” Martin answers. He too has a ruddiness staining his cheeks, noticeable but faint enough that Jon can still make out the spray of freckles on his face. Once again, Jon finds himself openly staring, eyes tracing the constellations they make. “Don’t

want to overdo it on the wine. Tannins, you know – they can be a headache trigger, and – um… you alright, Jon?"

"Hmm?"

"You looked like you were sort of – spacing out."

You're lovely, Jon almost blurts out, but what he says instead is: "There are tannins in tea, too. And – and in most berries and legumes. And in dark chocolate, and vanilla and cinnamon, and several other spices – tarragon, thyme, clove, cumin – and they're found in nuts, too, in varying amounts – acorns especially."

Distantly, he can feel his hands moving animatedly, siphoning off some of that background hum of nervous energy bubbling under his skin.

"Concentrations tend to vary in wines, too. Reds contain the most. Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Malbec, Tannat, and Nebbiolo are some of the most tannic varieties, and – there's a particular class of tannins that gives red wines their color, actually – pigmented tannins, they're called, and they're created when oxygen reacts with tannins and anthocyanins – which is another phenolic compound – and – and…"

Jon trails off, his hands stilling and hovering uncertainly in the air, as a charmed, affectionate grin comes to life on Martin's face. Then Melanie breathes a quiet, snuffling chuckle into her mug, and Jon belatedly notices that everyone else is staring at him, too. Georgie laughs outright at his deer-in-headlights expression; Daisy is smirking fondly; and even Basira looks quietly amused.

"S-sorry," Jon says, clearing his throat. He tries – unsuccessfully, he suspects – to mask his self-consciousness under the guise of being *very* preoccupied revisiting his perennial quarrel with his hair. He pushes a flyaway, tousled section behind his ear for what must be the hundredth time this night, having once again misplaced his hair tie. *How does he manage to go through so many hair ties?*

“Don’t be,” Georgie says. “Been awhile since I last saw you wine-drunk. Good to see you’ve still got loose lips and all the passion of the ‘random article’ feature on Wikipedia. No, really!” She laughs again, bright and lilting, seeing the indignant expression on his face. “It’s adorable.”

“Shut up,” he replies, rolling his eyes good-naturedly and taking another sip from his mug. Predictably enough, his hair once again comes loose to brush against his face, tickling his neck where it falls. *Wait, didn’t he have a hair tie earlier? Where did it get to?*

For a while the group carries on like that, passing the time in cozy camaraderie as they polish off their supply of cheap alcohol. An unfinished card game spreads haphazardly on the floor in the center of their little circle, forgotten in favor of a spirited *(ha)* conversation about the ghost-hunting trade between Georgie, Melanie, and Basira. Trading scathing reviews of the latest in ghost-detection technology now, Jon thinks. Basira says something about pseudoscience and dramatization, and then Georgie and Melanie are off on a tear about overhyped spirit boxes.

Jon’s attention keeps sliding away like water through cupped hands, so he’s sort of experiencing the discussion in stops and starts. At some point Daisy makes a side comment about haunted dolls, and the conversation makes another sharp pivot as Georgie and Melanie both pounce on the subject. A few seconds later, Jon’s lost the plot again.

There’s something refreshing, he thinks idly, about losing track of time not because of a feverish mind, or confused panic, or numb dissociation, but simply because he feels… secure. Safe enough to just let himself *be* in the present moment: no hypervigilance clouding his thoughts, no abject dread pressing in on him, no obsessive hand-wringing about the imminent future.

Admittedly, there’s something incongruous about feeling even slightly carefree in such a place, on the eve of a point of no return for one of their own. But for once, Jon doesn’t feel a need to dwell on that. He trusts these people; even dares to think that they’re including him not out of pity or obligation, but because they trust him, too. He might not go so far as to believe that he’s *wanted,* per se, but he doesn’t feel *un*wanted either, and it’s… it’s nice.

The wine probably doesn’t hurt, Jon thinks, but he isn’t about to complain. By tomorrow morning, his chronic insecurities will no doubt return to haunt him – all those timeless fears

of being rejected, of being inadequate, of being an *annoyance* – but for now, he feels… good? Yeah. Yeah, he feels *good.*

Weird, he thinks to himself.

“Weird,” he reiterates, inadvertently speaking the thought aloud this time. His voice is soft with bemused wonder, but Martin is sitting close enough to overhear.

“What is?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

“You know. Here.” Jon moves his hand in a vague circle, gesturing at nothing and everything. “Being.”

He has no idea what he means, and he doesn’t really care to puzzle it out, satisfied to just… catch a glimpse of the thought and let it pass him by.

Martin snorts and shakes his head with a warm smile, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “If you say so.”

Jon’s only answer is a contented, noncommittal hum.

After a long while, the conversation hits a natural lull. It’s as good an opportunity as any for Basira to bite the bullet and address the elephant in the room.

“So,” she says, with no small amount of hesitation judging from her contrite grimace, “not to ruin the mood, but…”

“You wanna go over the game plan for tomorrow,” Melanie guesses. She has herself situated on the floor with her back pressed to Georgie’s chest, Georgie’s arms wrapped securely around her middle.

“Yeah. Sorry, but we should probably get it out of the way before anyone passes out.”

Basira is the only fully sober one in the room – she doesn’t drink – but no one is blackout drunk. Melanie and Georgie are both nursing a mellow buzz; Jon is still slightly foggy, but lucid enough, having cut himself off some time ago; Martin seems more unwound than usual, but otherwise sober; Daisy is, as expected, almost entirely unaffected despite having outdrank the rest of them by far.

But the night *is* getting on, and everyone is beginning to flag. True to Basira’s words, Melanie’s eyes are half-lidded as she reclines against Georgie, practically boneless.

“Fair enough,” Melanie says with a hum that dissolves into a yawn halfway through.

“So what *is* your game plan?” Daisy asks.

“I, uh…” Melanie yawns once more, then lets out a tired groan as she sits up straight and rouses herself to full attention. “I figured I’d just – um, *requisition* an awl from the library and…” She makes a stabbing gesture with one hand.

Martin cringes sympathetically. “Shit.”

“I mean, if an awl can punch through a book–”

“Yeah,” Martin interjects. “I – I get the picture.”

“No need to make it overly complicated, right?” Melanie says with a nervous laugh, leaning back when Georgie tightens her grip.

“Do you… need any help?” Basira asks.

“I can handle it,” Melanie says, but she throws a questioning glance in Jon’s direction.

“You managed it on your own last time, yes,” he says. “You came to say goodbye and told me to give you five minutes before calling an ambulance, but that was all the assistance you asked for.”

“Huh. That… actually was my plan this time, too. I figure the time crunch will give me extra incentive to just – you know.” Melanie makes another vague stabbing motion. “Get it over with.”

“You certainly were – *efficient* about it,” Jon says.

“What story did you give them last time?” Melanie asks.

“I just… told the operator that there had been a workplace accident. Involving, uh – ‘significant eye trauma.’ When the ambulance got here, they were a bit too preoccupied to waste time interrogating me, and they whisked you away fairly quickly. I actually got the impression they weren’t keen on being here for any longer than absolutely necessary.”

“Can’t imagine why,” Basira says sardonically.

“As it turns out, local hospitals and paramedics are as leery of the Institute as the police are, shockingly,” Jon agrees. He’s momentarily startled when Basira graces him with an amused smirk. He offers a tentative grin in return, then turns his attention back to Melanie. “At some point the truth must have come out that it was a self-inflicted injury, though. Like I mentioned earlier, your therapist needed to be persuaded to let you go home with Georgie in lieu of psychiatric hospitalization.”

“Not looking forward to *that* confrontation,” Melanie says with a humorless chuckle. “Can’t even make up a lie about a cursed artefact making me do it. It’d probably only add fuel to the fire.”

Not missing a beat, Georgie turns her head to kiss Melanie's temple.

"And, um…" Georgie falters, gnawing on her bottom lip, before looking up to meet Jon's eyes. "Did it go well in terms of, uh… just – are there any complications we should know about? Aside from the obvious, I mean. Is there anything we could maybe – I don't know, prevent, or mitigate, or – anything to make the recovery… smoother, or quicker, or…?"

"I only saw the immediate aftermath," Jon tells her, apologetic. It's been awhile since he's seen Georgie this rattled, and it's as painful as ever to witness. "I wasn't privy to the recovery period." He looks to Melanie again. "Once the ambulance left here, I didn't see you again until weeks later, when you were already out of the hospital and set up at Georgie's flat. You were still wearing the bandages, but you were on your feet, and – like I said, I only saw you briefly, but you said you were doing well. You *looked* like you were doing well. More at ease than I'd ever seen you, I think." He smiles to himself. "Liberated."

"Then it's worth it," Melanie says in an almost reverent whisper, one corner of her mouth curving up in a faint, lopsided grin, hands folded loosely in her lap. Georgie unwraps her arms from around Melanie's middle so she can instead rest her hands atop Melanie's. As Melanie intertwines their fingers, Georgie rests her chin on Melanie's shoulder and nuzzles into the crook of her neck with a quiet sigh.

It's an open, casual display of affection, but Jon looks away, somehow feeling as if the moment is too intimate, too personal for him to behold. Despite his best intentions, his gaze is never gentle, never innocuous. People can always *sense* when he's looking – because it's never *just looking,* is it? It's *watching,* and it's never just *him* watching through his eyes. The thing lurking behind them is predatory, possessive, and pitiless as it claims, chronicles, and classifies that which sates its appetite.

"What about Jonah?" Basira asks abruptly, wrenching Jon away from his silent brooding. "Is he going to wonder how we found out how to quit?"

"Well… last time, I only found out how to quit after I found a particular statement he was keeping in his office." Jon scoffs. "One that the Eye *really* didn't want me to know. I assume Jonah was Watching, but he didn't interfere when I told you all about it. Probably thought

none of us would go through with it. Especially me. Either he knew it wouldn't work for me, or he assumed I wouldn't have the stomach for it–"

Jon shuts his mouth. That line of thought doesn't have a constructive conclusion, he tells himself, and he does *not* need to linger on what Jonah Magnus thinks of him.

"This time," he says instead, "he might wonder how it is I learned about it, yes. I assume he was listening in on my conversations with Georgie during the coma, which means he probably overheard me tell her that I knew of a way to quit. That's not *ideal*, but… I expect he'll just chalk it up to the Archivist's ability to Know. And given that there isn't exactly a plethora of ways to quit, I doubt he'll be too surprised when one of us turns up blind." Jon rests his chin on his fist as he deliberates. "He might question how it is I managed to Know something that would threaten the Eye's hold on its marks – it does tend to be *selective* about the insights it offers; doesn't exactly make a habit of being *helpful* – but…"

"You just Knowing it seems like a more obvious conclusion to jump to as opposed to you being a time traveler," Daisy says.

"That's the hope. Or maybe he'll assume I made an educated guess. One that happened to be correct for once," Jon says with a self-deprecating huff. "I've never gone into the specifics outside of the tunnels, so he can only guess at my thought process, but there are enough scattered clues to piece together that hypothesis. Gertrude's penchant for cutting the eyes out of photographs, a few Beholding-adjacent statements with blinding themes, and…"

"The sheer prevalence of eye motifs hiding around the Institute?" Basira offers.

"Yeah."

"In retrospect, it seems obvious, doesn't it?" Basira's hollow laugh does nothing to temper her pained grimace.

"In our defense," Jon says, "we were… fairly distracted."

“By a lot,” Daisy adds.

“Like, all the time,” Martin concludes – and all of them exchange looks of exhausted, bitter amusement. None of them are strangers to dark humor at this point. Sometimes it’s the last defense against debilitating terror; all too often, it’s the only alternative to outright despair.

“You know, I used to think Elias just had shit taste,” Melanie says suddenly. “He seems like the type to go for gaudy interior design.”

“Oh, he’s *that*, too, I assure you. He just *also* has an unfortunate gift for balancing form and function.” Jon heaves a vexed sigh. “Makes sense, I suppose. He and Smirke were colleagues, after all.”

An uneasy stillness settles over the group.

“This might go without saying,” Melanie says, “but I, uh – I won’t be around anymore, after I do this.”

“I think it’s best if you avoid the Institute entirely,” Jon agrees. “It defeats the purpose of getting out if you don’t *stay* out.”

No one dissents. The mood curdled and turned decidedly somber, they each begin to unfurl themselves from their places, all of them apparently independently coming to the conclusion that it’s time to disperse for the night.

“Meet here in the morning?” Melanie suggests, standing up and brushing her knees off. “It’ll be the last time I see most of you for a–”

She stops abruptly, the dangling thought sitting heavy in the air between them. In the ensuing awkward silence, Georgie is unable to stifle the soft, distressed noise that claws its way out of her throat. Melanie immediately seizes Georgie’s hand, pulls her to her feet, and draws her in

close. Georgie presses herself up against Melanie's side, squeezing her eyes shut and releasing a shaky exhale.

The enormity of the moment borders on claustrophobic until Basira clears her throat.

"Meet here in the morning," she says decisively, summing up the unspoken consensus.

Jon suspects the self-assurance she projects may be little more than a performance put on for the benefit of the group, but it acts as an anchor all the same.

The six of them break off into pairs after that – Melanie and Georgie each with an arm wrapped around the other's waist; Daisy leaning on Basira for support; and Martin shadowing Jon without a word exchanged, a meaningful glance passed between them imparting everything there is to be said. With that, they all drift to their respective sleeping arrangements for the night.

Chapter End Notes

- Listen,,, I just wanted the team to have a nice bonding session in between routine catastrophes. They deserve a bit of calm sandwiched between storms.

- I hope you all know that my headcanon for tipsy!Jon is essentially a combination of "doesn't drink often, but when he does, he's a bit of a lightweight" and "becomes more and more like Brian David Gilbert from an Unraveled video with every glass of wine."

- Another 6-7k chapter. I wanna say I'll stick with the shorter chapters from here on out – which was the average length in the beginning, before I just… did one 10k+ chapter and then didn't stop. But honestly who knows, my outlines are always extremely loose and that doesn't lend itself to consistency.

- All instances of Jon's Archive-speak in this chapter are from MAG 147.

- Oh, and Happy New Year (and a corresponding Good Riddance 2020). Wishing you all a safe & good one. c:

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

Resignation

Chapter Summary

The process(es) of resigning from a terrible, no good, very bad assistant position.

Chapter Notes

Hope you all enjoyed the (relatively) chill squad bonding session last chapter, ‘cause we’re getting back into oh-Ariana-we’re-really-in-it-now.jpg territory shortly.

CWs for Chapter 22: discussions of eye-gouging/eye horror (not graphic); brief spider/arachnophobia mentions; anxiety/panic symptoms; lots of dissociation/dpdr; Peter Lukas being a manipulative shit; Lonely-typical content (including fear of abandonment & some abysmal self-esteem on Martin’s part); allusions to police violence & Hunt-related themes (re: Daisy’s past actions); a Big Swear for Melanie, as a treat.
Let me know if I missed anything!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Georgie paces in a slow circle, alternating between biting her nails and picking at her bottom lip – entirely immersed in her own thoughts, judging from the faraway look in her eyes. Jon hasn’t seen her *this* overwrought since the last depressive episode he witnessed. Just watching her is enough to make his chest tighten with vicarious unrest.

Wary of contributing to a vicious feedback loop between the two of them with his own customary pacing and handwringing, he forces himself to keep his knees locked and hands at his sides. Still, he can’t help rubbing his fingertips together and rocking minutely on the balls of his feet.

“Why don’t we sit?” Jon finally interjects, wincing when it comes out more curtly than he intended – more like a command than a suggestion, but luckily without any accompanying static.

Be mindful, he silently chides himself: being on edge like this only makes him more susceptible to accidental compulsion.

"What if something goes wrong?" Georgie whispers. Jon doubts she even heard him beneath her nervous refrain. "What if–"

"Georgie?" Jon tries again. No response. He steps into her path and places a hand on her shoulder. "Georgie."

"What?" Georgie raises her head, but she isn't looking *at* him so much as she's looking through him.

"I think you should sit down?"

"What?" Georgie says again, sounding utterly lost. Her eyes are darting around the room now, as if she doesn't recognize her surroundings.

How the tables have turned, Jon thinks grimly.

"Come on," he says, taking her hand and guiding her to the nearest chair. She offers no resistance, trailing behind him like a flagging balloon. When he presses on her shoulder to coax her into a sitting position, she goes easily. Keeping hold of her hand, he drags another chair closer to her and takes a seat.

Okay. Now what?

Jon jiggles his leg as he wracks his brain for the right thing to say. She deserves more than handholding and awkward silence, but soothing words have never come naturally to him.

"Do you, ah… do you want to talk about it?" Jon cringes at his faltering delivery. "I'm sorry, I'm – I'm still not very good at this," he adds with a self-deprecating laugh – then

immediately shuts his eyes, kicking himself. Why are his attempts to relate to others always so clumsy and – and *weirdly self-centered?* "I mean–"

"I'm scared," Georgie blurts out.

"You… what?" Jon tilts his head. "But I thought – you don't feel–"

"Fear?" Her clipped, brittle laugh dies in her throat. "No, I don't. And that's exactly the problem, isn't it?"

Jon strokes the back of her hand with one thumb, but remains silent. She always elaborates on her own time, given some space to order her thoughts.

"I don't feel… terror," she says slowly. "After I had my… *encounter*, I did a lot of research on how the brain works. Trying to understand what was happening to me, you know?"

Jon nods. He's intimately familiar with that urge. As a child, he went through a *spider phase,* as his grandmother called it, obsessively seeking out any information he could on them, hoping even then that he could conquer his fear if only he could see the world through a detached, academic lens. There were plenty of scholarly odes to the spider to be found; no shortage of enamored arachnologists waxing poetic about the wonders of evolution and the vital role that arachnids play in their particular ecological niches.

Unfortunately, a phobia – especially one arising from acute trauma – tends to be resistant to reason and reality. His obsession only ever yielded heart palpitations and lucid nightmares. Despite that failure, he never stopped clinging to that idea that if only he could learn all there was to know about a thing, he could finally scrape together some semblance of control over his fear.

In many ways, that fixation is exactly what drew him to the Magnus Institute.

Unless the Spider really was pulling the strings all along, he thinks, and then: *No, we are* not *going there.*

"As far as I can tell," Georgie continues, "my sympathetic nervous system still functions. I can still experience all the physiological aspects of sympathetic arousal – and fear is only one possible trigger for those sorts of responses. What's missing is my capacity to interpret those responses through the lens of fear. To *emotionally* process or identify them as fear.

"I can still experience anxiety, to an extent – or something close to it. But mostly in the context of worrying about others, being scared *for* them. I mean, I can feel *apprehensive* about the possibility of experiencing pain or loss or failure myself, I have a stake in my continued existence, I can recognize danger, but sometimes it feels… I don't know – mechanical, almost? There's just always the feeling of something missing. Something important. And there are times when I feel that void more acutely."

"Like now."

"Yeah." Georgie looks away, chewing her lip in silence.

"I'm listening," Jon coaxes, sensing that there's more she's holding back.

"It's just… hard to feel like a full person sometimes, you know?" Georgie says helplessly. "I worry sometimes that it – I don't know, does a disservice, I guess, to the people I care about? Like no matter how much I love someone, it isn't… complete? Or – genuine, in the right way? It's – hard to find words that actually describe it. There are times when it feels like I've lost something vital that made me human, that made me *me,* and it's… difficult to reconcile who I was – who I could have been – with who I am now."

"That I understand," Jon says softly.

"I know." Jon wishes he was less familiar with the sad smile she gives him just then. "It's just… I remember a time when I *would* have been terrified of all this. Not just worried, or upset about someone I care about being hurt, or devastated by the prospect of losing someone I love. *Terrified.* And knowing what I *should* be feeling – what I *would* have felt at some

point – is… it's unnerving. There's a void there that *shouldn't* be there. It's like… having part of you gouged out and left hollow. An absence that's so present it's almost visceral." She frowns. "Does that make any sense?"

"In my future I had a Flesh Avatar reach into my chest and wrench out two of my ribs, so… yes, actually."

Georgie blinks several times, then laughs breathlessly. "Do I even want to know?"

"Probably not." Jon returns a cautious smile, but the levity evaporates after a few seconds. "For what it's worth, I don't think that you have to have access to the full spectrum of human emotion in order to count as human. And I don't think any of this makes your concern for others any less heartfelt, or – or comforting. You might not be the same person you were before you were marked, but that doesn't make you a *lesser* person."

"You should try applying that metric to yourself sometime," she replies, not unkindly.

"It's–"

"Don't say it's different," she cuts in. "Just… keep it in mind, okay?"

"I'll, uh… I'll try." Georgie nods, but says nothing. Jon grips her hand a little tighter. "Listen, I – I know you're worried for Melanie, but I think it's going to be alright? I can't predict the future – well, I have knowledge of one possible future, but that's because I lived it. I don't have any precognitive abilities, or anything like that. But… it turned out okay last time."

Until I jump-started an apocalypse–

Jon reins in that thought before it can gain momentum. This isn't about him, and Georgie doesn't need his brooding right now.

“Melanie is a fighter,” he says instead, offering a tentative smile. “And she has you.”

Georgie shakes her head. “I can’t believe you came out of the apocalypse sappier than you were when you went in.”

“Side effect of traversing a post-apocalyptic wasteland with a hopeless romantic, I think.” That gets another little chuckle out of Georgie. “I mean it, though. I think Melanie will be okay, especially with you looking out for her. Not to mention, the Admiral is a perpetual serotonin generator.”

“You really miss him, huh?”

“Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve pet a cat, Georgie?” Jon practically whines, playfully dramatic. It manages to keep the amused smile on Georgie’s face, he’s pleased to note.

“Maybe I should bring him by sometime.”

“Absolutely not. This place doesn’t deserve him.” Georgie snorts. Although Jon is reluctant to ruin the temporary shift in mood, this is as good a time as any to broach a subject he’s been dreading. “Also, I, ah… I don’t want you to feel obligated to continue visiting here.”

“What?” Georgie says, eyes narrowed.

“If you have to take a step back,” Jon says carefully, “I’ll understand.”

“I mean, I might not be able to come by as often as I have been, especially while Melanie is still recovering, but that doesn’t mean I won’t be around at all.” Georgie’s frown deepens. “I’m not about to cut you out of my life, Jon.”

“I know. And I don’t want you to. But – no, listen,” Jon insists, seeing Georgie about to protest. “What I’m trying to say is – I know Melanie wants to put as much distance between herself and the Institute as possible. If it turns out that you staying involved in all of this is too close to home, then… well, I don’t want her to feel like she’s still trapped in the Institute’s orbit, is all.”

Or mine, he doesn’t say. He doesn’t want to be a reason for Melanie to feel unsafe. In the past, he has been – and that’s not who he wants to be.

These days, Melanie has come to view him more as a fellow captive than a complicit enemy. Lingering resentment still sparks to life from time to time; she still struggles with her anger, and once or twice, she’s had to leave a room for fear of that rage boiling over. Overall, though, she no longer directs the majority of her ire towards him. When they do butt heads, it hasn’t gone much further than bickering – and even that feels comforting in its familiarity and mundanity. Almost companionable, in its own way.

Most significantly, ever since their talk, Melanie hasn’t once likened him to Jonah Magnus. Jon doesn’t know if that’s because it’s no longer an automatic association at the forefront of her mind, or because she’s consciously watching her words around him, actively taking care to avoid tripping that perpetual trigger. Either way, Jon is grateful.

But Jon also knows that he’s inseparable from the Institute. Despite his intentions, and regardless of whether or to what degree the others hold him personally responsible, the fact remains: he’s embroiled in something unspeakably evil, and that poses a danger to anyone who stands too close to him.

Georgie doesn’t immediately respond, instead taking the time to seriously consider his words. He’s always appreciated that about her, as uneasy as these moments of silent suspense can make him.

“I’ll talk to her about it,” she says eventually, “once she’s recovered enough to have that discussion. I don’t know how she’ll feel about staying in direct contact herself, especially at first, but… I doubt she expects *me* to cut you off. And I imagine she’ll still want to know how everyone is doing, even if she doesn’t want the details.” She glances up to meet his eyes. “Anyway, regardless of how often I visit in person, I’m still going to be checking in with you, so answer your damn phone, will you?”

“I *do* answer my phone,” he says defensively. “I just… forget to answer *texts* sometimes. And I don’t get service in the tunnels–”

“Well, come up for air and cell service from time to time.” She wrinkles her nose. “Honestly, I don’t know how you can tolerate being down here for hours on end–”

Jon startles slightly as the trapdoor creaks open above their heads. Georgie stands as Melanie makes her way down the ladder, hurrying over to fold her into her arms. Basira follows behind, closing the trapdoor behind her as she goes.

“Mission successful, I take it?” Jon says quietly as Basira approaches him, giving Georgie and Melanie a moment to themselves.

“Uneventful,” Basira says with a shrug. “A few sidelong glances, but otherwise, none of the library staff even acknowledged us. Definitely didn’t seem keen on asking why we were rummaging in the repair supplies.”

“They probably didn’t want to know.”

“Yeah.” A small, rueful smile crosses her face. “Some of them used to talk to me, you know. Nothing personal – we weren’t close – but… when I returned a book, they’d ask what I thought of it, give me recommendations, that sort of thing. Now, though…”

These days she prefers to wait until everyone has gone home for the day before visiting the library, Jon Knows. He also Knows that the library staff are well aware that she’s the one pilfering research materials in the dead of night – and that they have no plans to confront her about it. She never leaves a mess, after all, and always returns items to their proper places once she’s finished with them, which is more than can be said for many of the students who make use of the library’s resources.

“You know, I don’t think any of them have looked me in the eye for months.” There’s a distinct note of regret in Basira’s voice. “They just watch me out of the corners of their eyes

when they think I'm not looking. I don't know if that's because they're afraid of Lukas disappearing them for fraternizing, or because everyone is leery of the Archives these days, or because I've just become less approachable. Maybe all three. Suppose it doesn't really matter."

Jon knows the feeling well. Before he can answer, though, Melanie clears her throat. Jon looks over to see her facing his direction, one hand clasping Georgie's tight enough to blanch her knuckles.

"This is it, then," Basira says solemnly.

"Yeah." Melanie closes her eyes and breathes a long, shaky exhale. "It's time."

"You're sure you don't want me there?" Georgie asks.

Melanie shakes her head. "I don't want you to see that."

"But–"

"She won't be alone," Basira says. "I'll be right outside the room."

Melanie faces Georgie fully, taking her other hand as well. "The plan hasn't changed. Basira will call 999. I'll make it quick, and – once it's done, Basira will come in and sit with me until the ambulance gets here."

"I have a general idea of what the response time should be like," Basira adds, looking at Georgie. "If we time it right, Melanie will have medical assistance within minutes. I can come get you when the paramedics get here, if you want to ride in the ambulance."

Georgie nods and tightens her grip on Melanie's hands. "Is that okay?"

“Only if you want,” Melanie says haltingly. “But – maybe try to avoid looking too close, if my eyes are uncovered? It’s just – it probably won’t be pretty.” A stressed laugh claws its way out of her throat. “Potential trauma fodder, you know? I don’t want to worry about you remembering me like that every time you see me, even after I’ve healed.”

“Okay,” Georgie replies softly.

“It shouldn’t take long. Just – wait here with Jon until then, okay?” Georgie nods again, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. “Speaking of which–” Melanie glances at Jon, as if just now remembering his presence. Startled by the sudden direct eye contact, he reflexively straightens his spine and stands at attention. “I guess this is goodbye, huh? For a while, anyway.”

“I, uh. I suppose it is.”

“Right. So, um… good luck, I guess?”

No disclaimers or ill will tacked on this time, Jon notes privately.

“You too.” He forces a smile, but he suspects that it comes off as awkward rather than reassuring.

“Try not to die.”

“Yes, ‘not dying’ is relatively close to the top of my to-do list.”

“If I come to find out that you’ve gotten yourself killed and broken the eldritch employment contract binding us all to this place *after* I’ve gone and gouged my eyes out, I’m going to be *livid*.”

“Well, we can’t have that,” Jon says wryly.

“Seriously, though.” Melanie’s smirk melts away, taken over by a somber, quiet sort of intensity. “Either beat Elias at his own game, or get the fuck away from this place the instant you find an out. Whichever comes first. Preferably without any of the self-sacrificial bullshit.”

Fractious as its delivery is, the demand is oddly touching, coming from Melanie.

“I, uh… I’ll do my best?”

“You’d better.” Melanie nods – a curt but cordial dismissal – and turns her attention back to Georgie. “Hey,” she says, her voice going measurably softer, releasing one of Georgie’s hands to reach up and cup her face. Her watery smile belies her mental state: resolve warring with trepidation. “Look at me?”

For a long minute, she studies Georgie’s face, clearly enraptured. Jon forcefully tears his gaze away from the intimacy of the moment.

“Okay.” Melanie takes a deep breath in and releases it slowly. “I’m ready. I’ll see you soon, okay? Or – well, I won’t *see* you, but – you’ll see me, and I’ll…” She huffs, rolling her eyes. “Oh, whatever – you know what I mean.”

Georgie lets out a tearful chuckle, and Melanie relaxes marginally.

“I’m sure about this,” she says. “I promise. This is what I want – a life with you, away from all of this. And if this is the price I have to pay, then… I’m okay with that. Really, I am.” She stands on tiptoe to give Georgie a peck on the cheek. “Love you.”

“Love you too,” Georgie says, leaning down for a return kiss, smiling weakly against Melanie’s lips. “See you soon.”

When Martin first heard the bustle outside his door – coworkers venturing outside their solitary offices to trade whispered questions and eager gossip as word of paramedics in the Archives made its way upstairs – his stomach gave a little lurch: a combination of horror and wonder. He hadn't expected Melanie to change her mind – he knows how determined she can be once she's settled on a course of action; how desperate she was to extricate herself from Elias' – *Jonah's* – schemes. Still, faced with the reality of it, he found himself in awe of her nerve.

That was yesterday. Martin didn't get much work done, preoccupied as he was. He isn't having an easier time of it today: his attention keeps slipping away to linger in remembrances of sterile hospital rooms and muted hallways, thoughts drowned out by the ghosts of sirens and beeping machinery.

"Well, this is an unexpected turn of events."

Martin jolts in his seat, heart leaping into his throat. It only takes an instant longer for his alarm to mutate into aggravation.

"Peter!" Martin spins around to glower at the man. "How many times do I have to–"

Peter flaps a dismissive hand. "To be honest, Martin, the drop in temperature tends to tip most people off. The only reason you continue to be surprised by my arrival is because you've become acclimated to the Forsaken."

The revelation is slow to sink in, a stark chill blooming in Martin's chest and snaking its roots outwards. Only now that it's been brought to his attention can he feel the nip in the air.

"Here I was certain you were becoming estranged from our patron, but it seems I needn't have worried." Peter's smile is laced with malice. "Or should I?"

Martin says nothing, eyes wide and stinging from the now-conspicuous cold. Peter sighs, folds his hands behind his back, and begins a meandering back-and-forth pace.

"Our success is dependent on your *voluntary* isolation, Martin."

"Yeah." The word turns to fog as it touches the air, and Martin finds himself transfixed by the sight. "You've said."

"It seems you need a reminder."

The condescension dripping from the words is enough to drag Martin back into the present moment. Heat rises in his cheeks, contrasting with the temperature in the room and making the chill that much more noticeable.

"You still haven't told me your plan," he snaps. "You keep expecting me to just – go along with whatever you're scheming, no questions asked."

"You ask *many* questions, Martin–"

"Yeah, and you never answer them! You're so – so bloody *cryptic* about all of this."

"Martin, Martin," Peter says, placating in the most patronizing way possible. Martin bristles: he *hates* the way Peter says his name. "There's no need to get so worked up–"

"If you want me to be a partner in – in whatever it is you're planning, you can't expect me to go on blind trust!"

"I'm still conducting my own research," Peter says mildly. "I would rather not confuse you with extraneous details before I have all the kinks worked out."

“I’m not an *idiot*–”

“Rest assured,” Peter interrupts, “if I was capable of stopping the Extinction *alone,* I would. Unfortunately, it will require someone touched by the Beholding.”

“Why?”

“Because it requires this place, and this place” – Peter’s lip curls in distaste – “is the Eye’s seat of power. The One Alone has no dominion here.” Martin crosses his arms, unimpressed. “You are the *only* one who can do this, Martin.”

“Why?” Martin repeats.

Judging from the muscle ticking in Peter’s jaw, his limited supply of patience for conversation is precipitously depleting.

“No, really,” Martin presses, “why *me?* I mean” – he spreads his arms out with a scornful chuckle – “look at me. I’m not exactly hero material, am I?”

“That really depends on you. I can’t force you to cooperate. It won’t even *work* unless you’re a willing participant.”

“And what makes you think that *your* plan is the *only* way? You – you keep going on about how it’s *my* choice. Well – what if I choose to work with the others? It can’t hurt to have more eyes on the problem–” Martin rolls his eyes at Peter’s unconcealed revulsion. “Yeah, I know. No one would ever accuse you of being a team player, *obviously.* But I can be the liaison; you don’t have to interact with anyone at all.” *Would* prefer *you don’t interact with anyone at all,* Martin thinks. “I mean, that’s already my role, isn’t it? Dealing with people so you don’t have to?”

“Martin,” Peter says, low and dangerous.

“I’ll do it off the clock, even. I’ll isolate myself in my office during the workday, or whatever” – Martin gives a flippant wave of his hand – “and continue researching the Extinction.” *And practically running the whole damn place on an assistant’s salary*, he grouses silently. “After hours I’ll pursue my own research with the others.”

“Part-time isolation will not suffice to equip you with the power you’ll need.” Peter presses his lips into a pale, rigid line. “Be reasonable. Are you really willing to risk an apocalypse, just because you can’t appreciate solitude?”

“If it starts to look like there’s no other option, I’ll reconsider.”

“And if the Extinction emerges while you’re wasting time searching for an alternative that doesn’t exist?”

“Based on the *limited* information you’ve given me, I don’t think the Extinction is going to just… emerge overnight. I’m still not even convinced it’s going to be worse than any other Fear. I mean, the Flesh is relatively new, isn’t it? And it didn’t… leave the fear economy in shambles, or whatever.”

“It isn’t about *competition,* Martin.” Peter releases a slow plume of fog through his nose before continuing, voice cool but simmering with pique just under the surface. “The Extinction is different from the other Powers. It is *defined* by widescale eradication. The other Powers may seek to change the world, but none of them strive for a world without us.”

“But what makes you so sure the Extinction *would?”*

Peter’s eyes narrow. Ignoring him, Martin runs his thumb along his bottom lip as he replays Jon’s impassioned conjectures on the matter: *It thrives on the* potentiality *of a mass extinction event, not the fulfillment of one.*

“What’s to say it wouldn’t be just fine with the world as it is, like the End?” Martin says, more confidently now. “People have been prophesying about the end of the world for – all of human history, probably. I doubt we’ll stop anytime soon. Maybe at its core the Extinction is just… the fear of an uncertain future. And a particular future doesn’t have to be realized in order to inspire fear, as long as the potential is always there. It’s about the suspense – the ‘what ifs’, the unknown, the – the lack of *control* in it all.” Martin laughs. “In a way, that’s… that’s what most fears boil down to, isn’t it?”

“The stakes are rather high to gamble on a thought experiment, don’t you think?” The temperature plunges a few more degrees as Peter speaks. “I think that the most important ‘what if’ you should concern yourself with is *what if you’re wrong?”*

“And what if I’m not?” Martin counters. “You act so authoritative, but aren’t you also just speculating? When I agreed to work with you, you told me you would give me evidence to support your theory. So far, I’m not convinced. You’re going to have to give me more to go on than just ‘trust me.’ I mean, if it’s between trusting you and – and trusting Jon, and the others? You can’t really be surprised if I choose them over you.”

“Oh, Martin,” Peter tuts, shaking his head with derisive, disingenuous pity. “Since when has the trust you’ve placed in others ever been reciprocated?”

“I trust him,” Martin says defiantly.

“But does *he* trust you?” Peter pauses for effect. “Of all the times you’ve allowed yourself to form attachments, has anyone even *once* genuinely returned those affections?”

Jon did.

Whatever expression Martin is wearing brings a sneer to Peter’s face. Martin grits his teeth and ignores him.

*Jon **does**,* he corrects. *Present tense. He said as much.*

Martin still can't fathom what Jon could possibly see in him, but Jon wouldn't lie about something like that, right? He wouldn't.

…would he?

No, he wouldn't, Martin chides. *You know he wouldn't. Trust him.*

"Sure," Peter persists, "you may open yourself up to the potential for something more, but you know as well as I do that it won't last. Is the inevitable loss *really* worth the risk?"

"I don't know," Martin says. He tries to ignore the slight quaver that insinuates itself into the declaration. "But if I never take the risk, I'll never know, will I?"

"I think you already know the answer." Peter's pale eyes glitter with spite. "Remember what it felt like, languishing at the Archivist's deathbed. Recall the state you were in when you first came to me."

The words are incisive, sliding under Martin's skin and lodging there like shrapnel. He can feel his confidence waver, the conviction he stood fast on only seconds ago splintering underneath him like thin ice.

"How many times do you think he can court death and survive? He all but died stopping the last apocalypse; he was willing to bury himself alive for a woman who tried to kill him. How do you think he'll react if you tell him about any of this? You think he'll listen to reason? Trust in your judgment?" Peter fixes Martin with a smug, hungry look. "Or will he throw himself in front of the first bullet he sees?"

He already knows about all of this, Martin reminds himself. Jon isn't about to sacrifice himself on account of the Extinction. Moreover, he seems to be genuinely committed to working as a team rather than striking out on his own.

But he also sees himself as a cataclysm waiting to happen, says the nagging doubt skulking in the far corners of Martin's mind. As much as Jon insists that he doesn't want to die, he's already lived through one apocalypse. Martin has no doubt that Jon would sacrifice himself to prevent another, if it came down to it.

Jon is a powder keg of fear and guilt, and there is no shortage of potential ignition sources waiting in the wings. It only takes one untimely spark to set an archive ablaze.

"I trust him," Martin repeats to himself, but the statement is rendered feeble by the leaden, frozen knot unfurling in his chest.

"Can you really weather another round of grief?" Peter continues, triumphant. He knows he's found a gap in Martin's defenses; all he needs to do now is twist the knife. "You've already done your mourning, cut the infection off at the source. Let him back in, and you only open yourself up to more pain. Better a numbed scar than a wound that never heals, don't you think?"

"No." There's something *off* about Martin's voice – as if it doesn't belong to him; as if it's originating from outside of himself, faint and frail and faraway, smothered by the cold, empty fog clogging his airways. "N-no, I…"

"Connection is a fleeting, fickle thing," Peter persists. "It's a lie people tell themselves. The truth is that we are all alone. In the end, all we have is ourselves. Think about it."

Unthinkingly, Martin shrinks away as Peter steps closer.

"You asked for more evidence." Peter slides a few statement folders onto the desk. "Take some time to yourself. Consider whether you're willing to wager on the fate of the world."

When Martin looks up, he is alone.

“It’s so *loud*,” Daisy mutters heatedly, stalking to and fro like a panther in a cage. She scratches furiously at her forearms as she goes, blunt fingernails leaving faint red stripes on pale skin.

“Daisy,” Jon says evenly, “I think maybe you should–”

“Itch I can’t scratch.” She pivots on her heel, retracing her short path in the opposite direction. “Feels like fire under my skin.”

“I don’t think clawing your skin off is going to help.”

Daisy barks a laugh. “With what claws?” She stops short and brandishes the backs of her trembling hands, fingers splayed to highlight nails gnawed to the quick, ragged cuticles stained rust-brown with dried blood. “Dull now.” Her eyes go unfocused, staring vacantly at her hands as if she doesn’t recognize them. “Too dull.”

“I’m sorry,” Jon says, and he means it.

It never gets easier to witness her like this, frenetic and fraying in the throes of the Hunt’s compulsion. These spells have a way of making her features look sharper, her mannerisms more animalistic. She’s all protruding bones and sallow skin, but that seeming frailty does nothing to tame the violence thrumming in her veins. If anything, that all-consuming hunger only makes her more fearsome.

Jon’s strict rations have given him an underfed, pinched look as well, but at least he has something. Not enough to put meat on his bones, so to speak, but enough to stave off starvation. Daisy, though…

When Jon takes a step forward, she rounds on him with teeth bared and a snarl in her throat. Jon flinches at the sudden movement.

“You’re afraid of me.” Daisy exhales an exhausted rattle of a laugh, as if vindicated. “Good. You should be.”

“I’m not afraid of *you,*” Jon says. “I have an overactive startle reflex. Always have, really.”

“You’re lying.” Daisy breathes heavily through her nose, fists clenched at her sides now. “Admit it.”

Jon knows what she’s trying to do. She *wants* him to lash out, to bite back, to make her bleed. He’s uncomfortably familiar with that craving. It’s like looking into a mirror.

“I’m not afraid of you,” he reiterates.

“Liar,” Daisy hisses, fixing him with a baleful glare.

He’s seen her like this many times before, hunger-ravaged and swamped by bloodlust. She’ll doggedly bash herself against the nearest witness to her shame like a ship crashed against a jetty, driven forward again and again by cresting waves of guilt and self-loathing until she’s free-floating wreckage. Every time, it gets more and more difficult to gather up all the debris and repair the damage. Jon fears that one of these days, the storm will pass and there won’t be enough pieces left to put her back together.

“I’m not a knife you can cut yourself on, Daisy,” he says patiently.

Daisy looks positively mutinous, mouth opening and closing several times before erupting: “Why *wouldn’t* you be afraid of me?”

“I used to be,” Jon admits, leaning back against the tunnel wall to take some of the weight off his bad leg. “Before the Buried. I was terrified of you. Dreaded every moment I had to be alone with you. Thought it was only a matter of time before you finished the job.”

“It was,” she rasps out – and with that, her shoulders slump and her fists relax to hang limply at her sides, fingers jumping and twitching with the last dregs of her agitation.

“I know. But then you changed. You were different, after the Buried. As afraid of yourself as I used to be of you. As afraid of yourself as I was of *my*self.” He looks her in the eye as he speaks. “I looked at you and saw my own fear reflected back at me. There are so many things to be afraid of. You were – you *are* trying very hard not to be one of them.”

“If I’m afraid of me, you should be, too.”

“Are you afraid of me?” Jon asks, shaping each word carefully to keep the compulsion at bay.

She pauses, considering the question.

“No,” she says eventually. “Afraid *for* you, sometimes.”

“As I am for you.” Jon’s tentative smile fades after a moment. “I’ll admit, I do have… reflexive reactions, sometimes. There were a few incidents where I walked into the breakroom and you were holding a knife, and my fight-or-flight response kicked in before my conscious brain could catch up with reality.”

Daisy squeezes her eyes shut, wrapping her arms around her middle.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. When she opens her eyes, the look on her face isn’t pleading so much as it is resigned. She isn’t asking for forgiveness. Jon doubts she ever will.

It’s just one more thing they have in common.

“I know,” he says quietly. “To be clear, I don’t feel unsafe with you, as you are now. It’s just… flashbacks. They can be – unpredictable. And if I’m already feeling on edge, or – or

not quite *present*, it doesn't take much to set me off. But," he adds, giving her a serious look, "I don't want you walking on eggshells around me. That only puts me more on edge."

"Fine. But will you actually tell me if I do something to scare you?"

"Yes." She made the same request last time. "But I've never had to. You could always feel when I was afraid. From a few rooms away, even."

"Yeah," Daisy says with a choked laugh. "Your blood is – very loud sometimes."

"And now?"

These episodes tend to be capricious. Sometimes, what seems to be the calm after the storm proves to be only a lull before a second wind. If the way she's wobbling on her feet and favoring one leg is any indication, Jon suspects that the worst of the flare-up has passed for now, taking her adrenaline surge with it. Still, he waits for her confirmation. Daisy takes a minute to mull over the question, head cocked slightly to the side as if listening.

"Quieter," she says.

With that, Jon lowers himself to the ground and sits with his back against the wall, beckoning her over to take a seat. She hesitates for a moment longer before following his lead, slumping down next to him with a labored sigh.

"Sorry for growling at you," she says sheepishly, rubbing the back of her neck.

"Don't worry about it."

Daisy tilts her head back to stare at the ceiling. "You said I ended up going back to the Hunt last time."

“Yes.”

“When?”

“September. But – but that doesn’t mean it has to happen again,” he adds hurriedly when he sees her face fall in a mixture of anguish and resignation. “It was – sort of a perfect storm of extenuating circumstances. Like I said before, if you didn’t let the Hunt back in, you and Basira would likely have been killed. But I think you knew you wouldn’t be coming back from it. Before you changed, you made Basira promise to hunt you down and kill you.”

“And did she?”

“She lost track of you in the chaos. You gave chase after one of the Hunters. Once you killed her, the other Hunter started hunting you. For revenge.” Jon’s voice drops to a low murmur. “A few weeks later, the world ended.”

Which makes it sound far more passive than it actually was, but Jon isn’t in the mood for a scolding should he opt for an ‘I’ statement.

“And then what?”

“You were a full-fledged Hunter in a – a perpetual fear generator of a world,” Jon says grimly. “Do you really need to hear the details?”

“Tell me,” Daisy says. “Please.”

Jon understands the need, but recounting the apocalypse never gets any easier. He closes his eyes, breathes deeply, and takes a moment to gather his thoughts.

“When I opened the door and let all the Fears into this reality,” he begins, “the world was divvied up into thousands of different domains, each belonging to a different shade of terror. With few exceptions, most people were confined to one domain – usually whatever aligned with their deepest fears. Avatars and monsters were subject to the Ceaseless Watcher, but otherwise able to exercise control over the humans in the domains of their patrons. Most seemed to stake out territory and settle in one place – customizing their own little spheres of influence, creating playgrounds of their own making. But some got around. You were one of the ones that traveled.”

“What was–” Daisy grimaces. *“Who* was I hunting?”

“Well… in that place, no one got what they deserved, only what would hurt the most. And people are rarely afraid of just *one* thing. Most were magnets for multiple fears. The more nomadic Avatars and monsters would gravitate towards whatever individuals were most susceptible to their power.” He bites his lip. There’s really no tactful way to phrase this next part. “In your case, you had a roster of specific targets that you were tracking. Former prey. Whether you were drawn to them because of their own fear of you, or because some part of you judged them to have ‘gotten away,’ so to speak… I’m not entirely certain. It may have been a bit of both.”

“I see,” Daisy murmurs. “Guess it makes sense that I would rank high among some people’s greatest fears.”

“Basira was tracking you when we ran into her. We were with her when we found you.”

“And was I… still me?”

“Yes and no,” Jon says hesitantly. “You *were* you, in a way, but only a small part of you. The Hunter. Everything else was buried too deep. Drowned. Even if I could have brought you back, it would have killed you. You – you didn’t even recognize me, or Martin. You recognized Basira – saw her as pack, wanted her to join you in the Hunt – but…”

“You were prey,” Daisy says quietly.

“Yeah.”

“You never did manage to grow a self-preservation instinct, did you?” Daisy squints at him. “I went full monster on you, and you still want me to sit next to you now.”

“You had sharper teeth then,” Jon says drily. Daisy scoffs and nudges his shoulder with hers. She doesn’t draw back after making contact, and when Jon doesn’t pull away either, she leans into him.

“Basira kept her promise?” Daisy asks after a minute.

“Yes. She didn’t want to, but…” Jon swallows thickly, the memory of Basira’s heartbreak bringing to mind his own. “It wasn’t an easy decision.”

Daisy rubs at her chest with one hand, as if to soothe an ache. “It wasn’t fair for me to ask that of her, was it?”

“Maybe not,” Jon sighs. “It seems fair choices are hard to come by, for most of us.”

“I… I don’t want her to have to make that choice this time.”

“Neither do I.”

“It’s never going to stop, is it?” Daisy glances at him, allowing her head to rest lightly on his shoulder. “It’s only going to get worse.”

“I’m sorry.” What else is there to say?

“Melanie got away,” Daisy says, a tinge of bargaining in her tone. “She managed to purge the Slaughter. And break away from the Eye.”

“Her situation was… different from ours. She wasn’t as far gone as we are. The Slaughter hadn’t fully claimed her, and the Eye never took her as an Avatar. But you’ve been living with the Hunt for most of your life; I signed myself over to the Beholding the moment I became the Archivist. We’ve become… attached to our patrons, dependent on them for survival. Symbiotic, in a twisted sort of way.”

“You really don’t think there’s a way back, then.”

“I don’t know for sure. I’ve seen it before, sort of, in my future, but – the world was different then. During the apocalypse, I was able to, uh… shift a person’s status from Watched to Watcher. I – I mean, technically everyone was *Watched* – the Eye had dominion over everything – but I could give someone control over one of the smaller domains. Create new Avatars, for lack of a better term.

“But reverse the process – turn a Watcher into solely the Watched – and most would just… unravel. I don’t know if that’s only because the full focus of the Ceaseless Watcher’s gaze just happens to be lethal – particularly for Avatars aligned with other Powers – or if an Avatar is simply unable to survive being cut off from their patron regardless of the means of separation. And the answers to those questions may differ between this reality and the one I came from. I do Know that *I* wouldn’t have been able to survive being cut off from the Eye unscathed. I was… too much a part of the Eye in that reality. Not sure about now. For either of us.”

“That’s a roundabout way of saying ‘no.’”

“I’m not saying *no*, I’m saying that I don’t know. Supposedly escaping the Buried was impossible, and here we are.”

“Apples and oranges,” Daisy says sullenly.

“Maybe. I think it’s all too complex for clear-cut categories. Even the hard-and-fast ‘rules’ are only as strong as our collective belief in them. Almost like our expectations shore them up. I’ve witnessed all of reality being rewritten – all physical laws and supposed universal constants reshaped to center the Eye.” He reaches one hand up to tug on the hair at the back of his neck. “After all I’ve Seen, it’s difficult to conceive of anything being categorically *impossible.* Between all the dream logic and reality bending, there’s plenty of space for firsts and exceptions to the rules.”

‘I don’t knows’ are where the hope lives, Martin said once. At the time, Jon teased him for being a hopeless romantic, but truthfully, Jon was just as hopelessly endeared by Martin’s belief in such things.

“Have you talked to Georgie yet today?” Daisy asks, apparently ready to change the subject.

“Oh, uh – yes. This morning.”

“And?”

“Melanie was out of surgery and stable, but she wasn’t awake yet. Georgie promised to call tonight with an update.” *Assuming nothing major comes up before then,* a worried voice in Jon’s head supplies. He shakes his head to jog the thought loose. “Speaking of Georgie… have you given any thought to her suggestion?”

“What,” Daisy says, drolly skeptical, “playing a video game?”

“I realize it’s… somewhat out of the box, but it might be worth a try. Like Georgie said, there are multiplayer games where you can, uh… hunt down other players.”

Daisy plucks absently at her collar, glowering at the opposite wall as if the bricks there committed a personal offense. “It’s not the same.”

“A simulation might not come close to a real hunt, no, but – you might still get something out of it? Maybe?” Daisy directs her scowl up at the ceiling. Jon only digs his heels in, undeterred. “There are even some that have a survival horror theme. An aesthetic that already puts players in the mindset to be frightened, you know?”

“People play those games for *fun,* Sims.” She finally looks at him, eyes narrowed. “It’s about *thrills,* not mortal fear.”

“Sometimes genuine fear can sneak through. Haven’t you ever been so creeped out by a horror story that it stayed with you after nightfall?”

“Not really?”

“O-oh. Well, some people have that experience.” Jon gives an awkward little cough. “Anyway, under the right circumstances, a game can get the adrenaline pumping as well as a chase can. A fight-or-flight response doesn’t necessarily require a real physical threat.”

Daisy raises her eyebrows, transparently cynical. “Do you *really* think the Hunt is going to be satisfied with jump scares and – and low-stakes adrenaline rushes filtered through a screen?”

“No,” Jon admits. “But it might take the edge off. Sort of like reading old statements does for me. Not enough to stop you starving, but maybe enough to distract from the hunger pangs. At least temporarily. If nothing else, you *did* say you need a new hobby, and it’s not like this place is overflowing with viable entertainment options.”

“I guess,” Daisy sighs. “I mean, it’s not like I’m paying rent. May as well squander my paycheck.”

“If that’s the case, you should see if that eBay listing for that vintage *The Archers* board game is still up,” Jon says drily. “Last I checked, it was £2 with no bidders.”

“Yeah, and £30 shipping.”

“Sounds like £32 well spent, if you ask me.”

Daisy snorts and bumps her shoulder against his. “You’re a menace.”

Adrift and thoroughly divorced from the concept of time, the end of the workday passes Martin by without his notice. Once again, he wonders whether Peter deliberately assigned him an office with no external window, not only to put another wall between him and the rest of the world, but to make it easier for him to lose track of time.

For an interminable stretch of time he sits catatonic, mind peppered with sporadic sensory input: Dead-weight limbs, listless and foreign-feeling. The brush of fabric resting against bare skin, every point of weightless contact a violation. The distant ticking of clockwork, rote and irrevocable.

Stand up, comes the thought, detached and intrusive: an instruction he cannot parse; empty phonemes wafted into a vacant mind, abandoned there to echo and disperse until they lose all meaning. A fragment of a signal from brain to nerves to fingers presses numb fingertips to thumbs, a cautious test yielding no sensation but for the vague, spongy give of flesh.

Then the body ostensibly belonging to him is on its feet, the connection between floor and soles disturbingly incongruous with unreality. Walking now, every footfall jarring in its impact; every step stretched and blurred like a botched time-lapse photograph; every molasses-sluggish forward motion met with invisible resistance, like swimming against a sludgy current.

He does not remember how or when or under whose direction he arrives in the Archives, swaying at the threshold of the Head Archivist’s office. Empty and still. Silence so pervasive it’s almost tangible. Viscous and inexorable. Trapping him like a fly in honey. *Drowning.*

When next he becomes aware of his surroundings, he’s wavering at the bottom of a ladder. Walls curving up and over his head, a brickwork warren stretching on and out into the murk.

Standing in place. Hovering like an afterimage. Rootless and incorporeal. Searching for… staring at… calling to…

There: something real.

"Martin?" Jon's breath fogs the air as he speaks, but the way he says the name… his voice seems to cradle the word, shielding it against the cold. He sits up straighter, keen gaze sweeping the area like a lighthouse beacon. "Martin, is that you?"

That's me, Martin thinks, and then, wonderingly: *He says your name like it's something precious.*

At that thought, Jon's eyes land on him like a searchlight.

"There you are." His soft smile immediately falters, brow furrowing in concern. "Are you alright?"

He's sat on the floor with his back against the wall, one knee drawn up to his chest, and Daisy pressed up against his side in a mirrored position, sharing a pair of corded earphones. Daisy is already thumbing at the screen of her phone, presumably pausing whatever it is they're listening to, as Jon removes his earbud.

Martin opens his mouth to speak, but the air in his lungs has turned to viscid fog and the confused tangle of half-formed thoughts in his mind refuses to coalesce into actual words. Jon exchanges a glance with Daisy, who is already moving to stand. Martin wants to object – *she doesn't have to leave on his account; he can see that they're busy; he's fine; he's just overreacting* – but before he can cobble together a protest, she's halfway to her feet, gripping the wall for support.

"I'm alright now," Martin can hear her say.

“You’re sure?” Jon asks in a low murmur.

“Yeah.” She winces as she straightens her spine. “Knowing Basira, she’s still poring over the same statements as she was this morning. She could do with an interruption.”

“Can you manage the ladder?”

Daisy stretches her leg out, testing her mobility. “Think so.”

They give each other another long look, a shared nod, and without another word, Daisy staggers her way to the exit and mounts the ladder.

As it does every time he witnesses these displays of unspoken understanding between them, an ugly pang of jealousy burns in Martin’s chest – some combination of envy, inadequacy, longing, and loneliness. *Possessiveness*, almost – and an instant later, the shame sets in.

But then the trapdoor closes, Jon looks Martin in the eye again, and the sincere, tender warmth sheltering there is enough to leave Martin reeling. It’s hard to comprehend anyone – let alone Jon – looking at him like that; difficult to reconcile requited affection with a lifetime of fruitless want. Martin can’t shake the feeling that it will always be this way – and that his inability to trust in unconditional love is precisely what makes him so unlovable in the first place.

Jon clears his throat and pats the floor beside him. He’s seated on a blanket, Martin just now notices, folded over several times to cushion the hard ground.

He’d better not be napping down here, Martin thinks to himself.

“Martin,” Jon says, in that impossibly soft tone he’s taken to using around Martin these days, “I’d like you to come sit, if you’re amenable.”

It's such a *Jon* way of phrasing the invitation, and the familiarity it engenders has Martin accepting without a conscious thought. He settles himself beside Jon, close but not touching. Those few inches of distance manage to be simultaneously loathsome and assuring. Martin lets his hand rest in that vacant space, fingers clenching around a fistful of blanket.

Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Jon's hand twitch, as if fighting back the urge to reach out and touch. Instead, he starts to rub the fabric of his trouser leg between his thumb and forefinger.

"What do you need right now?" Jon asks.

"I…" Martin pauses, unsettled by the sound of his own voice, grating and unfamiliar to his ears.

"Take your time."

It takes a minute for Martin to wrap his mouth around more than one syllable.

"Nothing," he says, the weight of the word nearly pinning his tongue in place.

"It doesn't sound like nothing."

Several more minutes pass before Martin is able to construct a full sentence.

"I'm just being stupid." The words seem to echo faintly in the tunnel, despite how quietly he says them.

"What do you need?" Jon asks again.

“Nothing,” Martin repeats dully. He doesn’t *need* anything.

Jon doesn’t immediately respond. Martin can feel himself go rigid, anticipating… what – aggravation, impatience, disengagement? But Jon only runs a thumb along his jawline, a thoughtful frown on his face.

“Okay,” he says eventually, “what do you *want,* then? What would – what would help you feel better right now?”

“I… I don’t know,” Martin says in a voice so feeble it’s nearly inaudible. He flexes his fingers uncertainly, chasing after any physical sensation at all, only to find them numb and deathlike. The helpless sigh that shudders out of him wants to be a whimper. “I just – didn’t – don’t – feel *real.* Feels like I’m not really here.”

“Hmm.” Jon looks at him – *really* looks at him, taking his time to study Martin’s face. “Well, I can confirm that you *are* here.”

“You… you can see me?” Martin asks meekly, pleadingly, dreading the answer.

“Yes.” Jon pauses. “And if you’re agonizing over being a bother, don’t, because you aren’t. I always like seeing you.”

He should trust Jon – he *does* trust Jon – but it’s still a constant struggle to drown out that Lonely part of him that insists that isolation is *safer*, more dependable, and far more habitable. Unthinkingly, Martin reaches over, hand trembling in the air above Jon’s, fingertips just barely ghosting across scarred skin.

“Would you like me to hold your hand…?” Jon ventures.

Martin’s fingers curve inward as he pulls back slightly. “I, um.”

“You can say no,” Jon reminds him.

“I… I want it, but I – I – I don’t know if I can handle it right now, and I–” Martin draws back entirely, flapping both hands in frustration, trying to relieve the pins-and-needles sensation prickling through his veins. “I hate this. I hate *being* like this.”

Martin grimaces at the outburst, but Jon doesn’t seem to be judging him. Instead, he’s looking off to the side, a crease between his eyebrows now, as if he’s working through a problem.

“No skin-to-skin contact,” he says to himself, and then he looks to Martin. “Pressure helps me sometimes, when I feel like things aren’t real. You could… lean against me? If you want.”

“I…”

“You don’t have to,” Jon rushes to reassure him.

“It’s – not that I don’t *want* to. I guess I’m just…” Martin can feel himself flush with embarrassment. “It’s daft, but I’m worried that I’ll be – I don’t know, incorporeal, or something.”

“I distinctly recall you telling me that you’re not a ghost.”

It takes a few seconds for Jon’s deadpan humor to sink in. When it does, Martin nearly chokes on a surprised laugh.

“I still can’t believe you thought I was a ghost,” he says, cracking a smile. The tight, bitter-cold knot in his chest yields just a little, like ice disintegrating under a spring thaw.

“In my defense, I was quite distraught at the time.” Jon’s eyes wrinkle at the corners and Martin is struck by overwhelming fondness. He doesn’t pull away when Jon reaches out,

open palm hovering just above his shoulder. “May I?”

Cautiously, Martin nods.

“Hmm.” Jon applies the lightest touch at first, watching Martin’s face carefully. He waits until Martin nods for him to continue before he presses down more firmly. Before long, Martin can feel the warmth of Jon’s hand through his jumper. That warmth carries over into Jon’s smile. “Feels solid to me.”

The confirmation comes as a relief, as foolish as that makes Martin feel. He braces himself and leans against Jon’s side, releasing his held breath when his body meets with tangible resistance. At first he worries that Jon, scrawny as he is, won’t be able to support the weight, but he doesn’t budge when Martin melts against him. After that, it’s a struggle for Martin to keep his eyes open.

Jon must notice, because he whispers, “You can rest. I’ll be here.”

Martin doesn’t even have the strength to nod, let alone the energy to argue. He allows the steady rise and fall of Jon’s chest to lull him into an almost meditative state, his mind still floating somewhere outside of himself, but now tethered to the ground.

Then the silence starts nipping at his heels.

“Too quiet,” he mumbles. “Talk to me?”

“What about?”

“Anything.”

“Did you know that highland cattle have a double coat?” Jon says after a minute of consideration. “It insulates them against the cold. The outer layer is long – the longest hair of

any cattle breed, in fact – and oily, which helps ward off the rain. Underneath is softer, almost woolly hair."

Once Jon gets started, those little scraps of trivia soon progress to a nearly encyclopedic lecture. It doesn't take long for Martin to lose himself in the rich timbre of Jon's voice as he goes on about various Scottish breeds of cattle. Although he doesn't fall fully asleep, Martin manages to drift in and out of consciousness enough that he loses track of time once more. This time, though, it's a comfortable daze: there's someone to keep him from straying too far.

At some point, he unthinkingly seeks out Jon's hand. Jon presses his thumb into the center of Martin's palm, rubbing small circles there, coaxing Martin further into peaceful relaxation.

"Sorry for interrupting you and Daisy earlier," Martin murmurs groggily into Jon's shoulder.

"Oh, we were just listening to *The Archers."*

"Are you taking the piss?" Martin asks, opening one eye to scrutinize Jon's expression.

"Unfortunately not."

"You like *The Archers*."

"Good lord, no. Blame Daisy."

"Daisy likes *The Archers*," Martin says, even more dubiously, sitting up now to squint at Jon.

"There are stranger things."

Martin snorts and nestles into Jon's side again. "If you say so."

“Feeling better now?” Martin reflexively snuggles closer. Jon laughs softly, a little puff of a breath that rustles Martin’s hair. “I’m not going to deny you cuddles if the answer is ‘yes,’ you know.”

“Cuddles,” Martin whispers, the word dissolving into a clipped giggle.

“What?” Jon tilts his head. There’s a puzzled scowl on his face, as if he’s trying to decide whether or not he should take offense. It’s impossibly endearing.

“Cuddles,” Martin repeats, in a poor approximation of Jon’s voice this time. “Not a word I ever expected to hear from you.”

“Quiet, you,” Jon huffs, but he can’t disguise the way his indignant pout cracks into a smile under the weight of his own amusement. He almost seems to preen, as if pulling a laugh from Martin is a victory on which to pride himself. He reaches up with his free hand, pausing just above the top of Martin’s head. “May I?”

At Martin’s affirmative, Jon begins to comb his fingers through Martin’s hair, fingernails lightly scratching against his scalp. For the briefest of moments, some primal fragment of him recoils from the contact, instinctively unnerved by the vulnerability inherent to such closeness. Martin spurns that voice, breathes through its fit of angst and panic, and leans into the touch.

Little by little, step by step, he’s acclimating. He just wishes that it wasn’t such a *process* each and every time he lets his guard down like this.

“Bad day?” Jon asks once Martin settles.

“Something like that.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really,” Martin groans. “But I should.”

“Only if you want to.”

“No, you should know, I just…” Martin heaves a wearied sigh. “Peter’s back.”

Jon gasps like he’s had the wind knocked out of him. The hand stroking Martin’s hair abruptly stills; the other, still clasped in Martin’s, constricts like a death-grip.

“Did he hurt you?” The question is steeped in an artificial, fragile sort of calm, but Jon can’t quite mask the intensity buzzing just under the surface: fear, protectiveness, and desperation all intermingled and reinforced by that ominous inkling of power that, no matter his intentions, lurks behind every word.

“He didn’t do anything out of the ordinary. Just… trying to get me to recommit to the Lonely.” Martin scoffs. “And of course he was trying to do it in a way that would make me feel like it was *my* idea. Get me to convince *myself* that it was what I wanted, rather than something he was pressuring me into.”

“Of all the Powers, the Lonely is one of the most insidious, I think,” Jon says quietly. “It seeks out victims who already have one foot in the Lonely, reinforces those fears, promises kinship – a paradoxical form of it, anyway – and then it just… waits. Spend enough time disconnected from the rest of the world, and it doesn’t take long to start telling yourself the lie that it’s for the best. That it’s what you are; that it’s all you’re meant to be.”

“And I fell for it,” Martin mutters.

“Anyone would, subjected to the right conditions.” Jon waits until he catches Martin’s eye before he continues. “It isn’t your fault. This is what the Fears do. It’s what they *are.* They find an opening, they sink their hooks in, and they pull you under. They don’t let go until

either you drown or you learn to breathe fear. The only way out is for someone to throw you a lifeline, and even then, the odds aren't great. And the Lonely in particular – one of the first things it does is make it difficult to even *conceive* of a lifeline. It's hard to catch hold of one if you never think to look for it."

"I thought you hated convoluted metaphors."

"Yes, well, unfortunately the Powers-that-be tend to elude any sort of straightforward, concrete discussion," Jon grouses. "Just one more reason to begrudge them. My point is, the Lonely is an insufferable liar and so is Peter."

"What do you know, they're perfect for each other." The remark succeeds in putting a lopsided smirk on Jon's face, much to Martin's delight. "Anyway, Peter said his plan won't work unless I'm voluntarily Lonely."

"He's right, although his plan has nothing to do with the Extinction. He needs you to choose the Lonely because those were the terms of his bet with Jonah. He poaches you out from under the Eye – gets you to pledge yourself to the Forsaken – and he wins, with the Institute as a prize. He fails to convert you, he loses, and he does what Jonah wants, which is for me to be marked by the Lonely."

Jon says that last part so nonchalantly. As if it's a foregone conclusion; as if he's become so accustomed to dehumanization that it doesn't even give him pause. Martin grits his teeth, biting back a surge of anger on Jon's behalf.

"Yeah, well," he says tightly, "Peter bet on the wrong horse."

A sharp intake of breath leaves Jon sounding strangled when he says, eyes wide and lips parted, "Oh?"

"I mean, he can't just sic the Lonely on me like he would any other victim, right? That wouldn't count as a win. He needs me to *choose* it. And I'm not going to do that."

“Yeah?” The unguarded expression of cautious hope dawning on Jon’s face makes him look years younger.

“Yeah,” Martin says, feeling increasingly emboldened. “The funny thing is, I don’t – I don’t think I ever *chose* loneliness. I never *wanted* it – that was just a lie I told myself, and the Lonely just – echoed it back to me. S-so Peter’s out of luck, because if there are other options, then the Lonely will always be involuntary. Because it’s not what I want.”

“You mean it?” Jon brightens, leaning forward.

Martin’s heart skips a beat and flutters hummingbird-quick against his ribs. He doesn’t think he’s ever seen Jon smile – not like *this,* that is, beaming and uninhibited and altogether breathtaking. Immediately, Martin decides that he wants more. It seems wrong for something so exhilarating to be so *rare.*

He doesn’t know which of them moves first, and it doesn’t matter, because Jon is in his lap, and Jon is nuzzling into his shoulder, and Jon is *here* and solid and so, so alive in Martin’s arms, breathing warm and steady into his neck, smiling against his skin, hands scrabbling at his back to cling to his jumper. Martin’s fingers seek purchase of their own, and then something clicks.

“Jon,” he says, leaning back just far enough to confirm his suspicion, “is this *mine?”*

“Are you just now noticing?” Jon asks, devastatingly fond. “Martin, I’ve been wearing this jumper off and on for the last several weeks.”

“You have?” Martin all but squeaks, heat creeping up his neck and to the tips of his ears. “No. No, you–” Jon’s grin is widening, leaving Martin increasingly flustered. “I – I mean, yes, you *have,* obviously, I know that, but I – I – I–” Martin gulps, mortified, as Jon finally fails to contain his suppressed laughter. “Look, I didn’t recognize it until just now, alright?”

“Well,” Jon says, ducking his head to chuckle softly against Martin’s throat, “it’s mine now, and you can’t have it back.”

Which is fine with Martin, really, because he would be lying to himself if he said he wasn't helplessly charmed by the newfound knowledge that not only is Jon an unrepentant clothes-thief, but apparently also an insatiable cuddler.

Chapter End Notes

- To address Martin's concern: Jon does, in fact, nap in the tunnels sometimes. Listen, with Jurgen Leitner (derogatory) in absentia, there was an opening for the position of Beleaguered Tunnel-Haunting Hermit and Jon has all the necessary qualifications.

- So anyways, who else thinks Peter's bio on a dating app would probably just be that "every living creature on this earth dies alone" quote from Donnie Darko? I bet he thinks 'survival of the fittest' means 'every man for himself'. What an insufferable clown.

—

- So I've officially given up on consistent chapter length, lmao.

- No Archive-speak in this chapter to cite.

- I wanted to make a joke about a *The Archers*-themed Monopoly, so I asked duckduckgo if it was a thing. Sadly, it is not. There IS, however, a 1960s *The Archers* board game, and yes, there ARE eBay listings for it.

- Yes, I know that the video game thing isn't a viable solution re: the Hunt (I have something else planned for a longer-term solution). But I thought it would be fun as a temporary thing to take the edge off, and it's probably the closest she can get to something *like* a hunt without the physical danger. (And honestly I'm just having too much fun imagining Daisy getting into a Twitch streaming hobby where she just. Does manhunts in Minecraft or Rust or whatever.)

- The first section of this chapter was written before eps 190-192 dropped. I think it still lines up well enough with what we saw of Melanie & Georgie's characterization in these most recent episodes, with the qualifier that things have gone very differently in this AU compared with canon. (Also, I took some liberties wrt Georgie's not-feeling-fear thing, obvi. Some of it matches with the most recent episodes, some of it not so much, but I decided to keep it anyways.)

- Oh and I think I might have given myself cavities with the last section of this chapter. (I'm aro-spec; it's hard to tell when I'm going over the top, but hopefully it's fluffy without being overly cloying.)

- As always, thank you all for reading! <3

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

Epiphany

Chapter Summary

Basira suggests a new strategy; a plan is hatched.

Chapter Notes

Buckle up; this one is VERY dialogue-heavy, but I'm moving the plot along. \o/

Content warnings for Chapter 23: mentions of eye gouging/blinding; very brief mention of mental health checks/monitoring for self-harm in a hospital setting; mentions of starvation/restrictive dieting (re: Jon and Daisy's respective supernatural compulsions); references to canon Dark-related content/statements; anxiety; trauma-related trigger response (brief dissociation/dpdr & panic symptoms).

Let me know if I missed anything!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The following few weeks are uneventful to the point of being uncanny.

Although Martin continues tending to the minutiae of the Institute's everyday operations – and researching the Extinction, if only for appearance's sake – he relocates his workspace to the Archives. Prolonged interaction still leaves him feeling drained, he's still prone to sensory overload, and he still tends to avoid in-person encounters with the Institute at large, but increasingly, he seems to prefer company to solitude. Now that he has his own dedicated cot in Document Storage with the others, he rarely goes home to his flat at the end of the day. Braving crowds and mass transit just to wake up in an empty flat the next morning rapidly loses its appeal.

Physically, Melanie's recovery goes smoothly, with no unexpected complications. The main barrier to her discharge turns out to be her mental health evaluation. Even after her suicide watch protocols are lifted, it takes some time and no small amount of convincing before her treatment team and therapist agree to release her into Georgie's care. Although she's still grappling with trauma and learning to navigate the world without vision, she professes no regret. If anything, Georgie says, Melanie seems more hopeful than ever.

Jon takes three more statements from Daisy. The interval between the last two is shorter than he would have liked; he can only hope that it's a fluke, rather than an indication that his condition is escalating. These days, he coexists with a baseline of constant, gnawing hunger – but it's better than starving, he thinks each time he takes a good look at Daisy, steadily dropping weight that she cannot afford to lose. She cycles between periods of lethargy and bouts of teeth-gnashing, snarling agitation, but in the lulls, she does pick up a casual gaming hobby. It does little to sate her appetite, but according to her, it does scratch an itch she cannot name. If nothing else, it keeps her mind and her hands occupied.

Basira spends much of her time engrossed in private study, amassing an impressive hoard of reading material from the library. Lately, her desk looks nearly as cluttered as Jon's. She has yet to explain the exact nature of her research, but Jon suspects that it's less due to distrust and more because she herself doesn't yet know what she's seeking. After the third time Martin brings her tea and receives little more than a grunt of acknowledgment in response, he jokes that it's like his early days working with Jon all over again. Watching Basira hunched over her desk hours on end, reference books and notes spread out around her like a summoning circle, patently refusing to come up for air without persistent cajoling from Daisy, Jon can't deny the resemblance.

Peter makes himself scarce. It's as much a blessing as it is a concern. As much as everyone prefers his absence, none of them are optimistic enough to believe that Peter has given up. It feels rather like knowing there's a spider in the room, but not knowing *where* exactly it's lying in wait.

It's almost, but not quite, as unnerving as the looming, unpredictable threat posed by Jonah Magnus's continued existence. As far as anyone can tell, he has not made a move since Melanie's encounter with the Slaughter. Each day that passes without incident is like the ceaseless ticking of a time bomb, counting down the moments to catastrophe. Jon can't help feeling like a fish in a barrel – trapped, swimming in aimless circles, just *waiting* for the inevitable shot to ring out.

Now more than ever, he finds himself on tenterhooks, expecting some new and disastrous horror hiding behind every door, skulking around every corner, lurking between the pages of every book. After the incident with the Slaughter's bayonet, even just opening a drawer is a heart-pounding affair. Day by day, minute by minute, the interminable limbo is eroding his already-fraying nerves. He doesn't know how long he can weather the standstill.

And then, as with all things, it comes to an end.

When Basira shoulders open the door to Document Storage one morning with a battered cardboard box in hand, an excited gleam in her eye, and a brusque demand – "Tunnels. *Now.*" – on her lips, Daisy and Jon know better than to argue. Basira turns about-face on her heel and disappears from sight before either of them can even acknowledge the instruction.

"…alright then," Jon says. "We should probably…"

"Follow, yeah," Daisy agrees, already gingerly sidling to the edge of the cot on which she had been perching. "She only gets that wound up when she's had a breakthrough."

A symphony of harsh crackling cuts through the air as they each get to their feet.

"We sound like a low-budget fireworks show," Daisy groans as she stretches, yielding another round of popping joints.

"Yes, well," Jon chuckles breathlessly, "at least we're standing at all. I count that as a win."

"Take what we can get?"

"Better than nothing at all." Jon grabs his cane. "You alright to walk on your own?" Daisy nods. "You go on ahead, then. I'll fetch Martin."

As Daisy makes for the trapdoor entrance to the tunnels, Jon takes a detour to the breakroom. When he enters, Martin is just about ready to tip the kettle into the first of four mugs.

"Hold off on the tea," Jon says.

“What?” Martin whips around with an affronted expression on his face. *As if postponing tea may as well be a capital offense*, Jon thinks to himself, suppressing an amused smile. “Why?”

“Impromptu tunnel meeting,” Jon replies. He reins in a spark of hope when he says, tentatively: “I, ah… I think Basira’s found something.”

It doesn’t take long for the two of them to join the others, but by the time they do, Basira is in the process of unpacking her box of statements, having already cleared off Jon’s makeshift desk. It seems she’s blithely swept his many piles of clutter and looseleaf paper to the floor, he notes with dismay, further exacerbating the preexisting disorder. Daisy is standing nearby, hand braced on the table for support. When Jon raises his eyebrows at her in an unspoken question, she only shrugs.

Jon steps forward to peer at the statement folders now spread across the tabletop. It only takes a few seconds of perusing the case numbers – #0020312, #0151904, #0171102, and #0141407 among them – to detect a theme.

“The People’s Church…?”

“I know you said it isn’t a threat anymore,” Basira says, not looking up from her task, “but I was sifting through old records on them – out of curiosity, you know.” Jon knows all too well. “And I happened to come across this statement” – she shuffles through the folders fanned out across the tabletop and seizes one labeled *CASE #7150101*, brandishing it for Jon to see – “from 1715. John–”

“Flamsteed, yes,” Jon rattles off, “the first Astronomer Royale. A statement concerning the unsuccessful murder of his rival Edmond Halley, taken from an unsent letter to his friend and colleague Abraham Sharp, written on–” He cuts himself off when he notices Basira staring. “Um.”

“If you’re finished being an overeager card catalogue?” Basira says, arms crossed.

“Right. Yes. Sorry.” Jon clears his throat. “You were saying?”

“Flamsteed hated Halley,” she continues. “So much so that he had a spite-fueled nickname for him–”

“Reimer,” Jon jumps in, and then, wincing: “Sorry. Go on.”

“Do *you* want to tell it? Obviously none of this is news to you.”

“It’s not,” Jon admits. “You actually brought this statement to me last time, too. Made the same connection.”

“Oh,” she says, annoyance dissolving and self-satisfaction budding in its place. “So I’m right?”

“Yes.”

“Does anyone want to fill me in?” Martin interjects, a bit tetchily. “Sort of lost here.”

“Apparently Edmond Halley was associating with a group of worshipers of the Dark,” Basira explains. “Flamsteed spied on them carrying out what he thought was a pagan ritual in the woods. He suspected that some of his peers at the Royal Society might also be involved, he knew that publicly accusing Halley might backfire, and he was already nursing a grudge after Halley stole credit for his work, so Flamsteed decided to take matters into his own hands. He followed Halley the next time he went into the woods, killed him, hid, and watched the worshipers take the body away some time after. Later, Halley turned up at the Royal Society. Alive. Succeeded Flamsteed after he died, actually.” A pause. “Well, sort of.”

“Sort of?” Martin repeats.

“Flamsteed was convinced that he wasn’t really Halley anymore–”

"…he began to thank me – again and again – for his freedom," the Archive supplies. *"I stared into his eyes, and though they met mine, I saw spreading inside them the darkness and mist. Whether he be blind now, I know not, but those were not the eyes of Edmond Halley, though they were the eyes of my Reimer, the one I couldn't destroy–"*

A warm hand grabs Jon's in a strong grip and calls him back. With a disgruntled sigh, he leans against Martin's side. It had been a few days since he last lapsed into the Archive's chanting cadence, too. *Time to reset that counter to zero,* he thinks sourly.

"Anyway," Basira says, glossing over the slip, "I just thought… a man possessed by the Dark, going by the name of 'Reimer'…"

Daisy snaps her fingers. "Maxwell Rayner."

"Yeah," Basira replies. "We already know he could body hop like Magnus. Names can mutate over time, and there have been multiple men connected with the Dark going by some variation of 'Rayner' cropping up since the 1700s, so…"

"Wait," Martin says, "you're saying that Rayner was originally Edmond Halley? Like, the guy Halley's Comet is named after?"

"Yes," Basira says blandly, as if this revelation is no more novel than confirmation of the sky being blue.

"And he was murdered by another famous astronomer."

"Yes."

"And he adopted the nickname given to him by the man who *murdered* him," Martin continues incredulously, "altered it slightly, and then just… kept using it for over three

centuries."

"That *is* a pretty dark sense of humor," Daisy deadpans, giving Jon a sly, goading look out of the corner of her eye.

"You're the worst," he informs her pleasantly, eliciting a triumphant laugh from her.

"The murder was the thing that least surprised me, honestly," Basira says. At Martin's blank stare, she shrugs. "Astronomy is one of my favorite subjects, and the history of the field is almost as interesting as the subject itself. Most biographies of Flamsteed have whole chapters on his feud with Halley and Newton, along with reproductions of his letters to his colleagues complaining about them."

"Academia is just like that," Jon says.

"It really is," Basira says, shaking her head with a small smirk. "Honestly, if you read enough first-person historical accounts – *especially* personal correspondences – you start to realize that people really haven't changed all that much over the centuries. Petty drama and office politics are nothing new. Arguably they were even more melodramatic back then – bruise someone's ego, and it could end in a formal duel to the death. I guarantee that if all the historical figures that society puts on a pedestal had access to internet comment sections, they would seem much less impressive."

"Trust me, they would," Jon says sardonically. "Remind me to tell you about Byron and Keats sometime."

Martin grins. "Oh, god, they *hated* each other, didn't they? I remember reading this one bio–"

"We're veering off track," Basira interrupts.

Jon gives Martin a knowing smirk. "I'll tell you all about the unabridged escapades of your favorite overrated Romantic poets later."

“Is that a promise or a threat?” Martin quips back.

“Yes,” Jon replies.

“Moving on,” Basira sighs. “Flamsteed’s statement got me thinking. People have been deifying the Dark for centuries. The People’s Church is only a modern iteration of that.”

“Most of the Fears have had a cultlike following at one time or another,” Jon says, unsure where Basira is going with this. “The Dark isn’t unique in that regard.”

“No, but it got me thinking about this *other* statement I read awhile back–” Basira rifles through her messy collection of folders until she finds the one she’s looking for, holding it out to Jon for inspection. He squints at the label: *CASE #9970509.*

“One of the ones Gertrude took in person,” Jon recalls. “Sergeant Walter Heller, regarding his happenstance discovery of a derelict portion of the Serapeum of Alexandria in 1941. Gertrude suspected that it was an ancient predecessor of the Archives.”

“Yes,” Basira says, brimming with enthusiasm. She seems keen to walk them through each point of her thought process on the way to revealing whatever epiphany she seems to have reached, growing more and more animated with every step she takes. “The Serapeum itself was supposedly destroyed by a Christian mob in 391 AD, but Heller found a mummified corpse in one of the chambers that was centuries younger. There was also some sort of one-eyed undead creature,” she adds offhandedly, almost as an afterthought, “that Gertrude thinks may have been a former Archivist–”

“It was,” Jon murmurs.

“–but that’s not what stood out to me.”

"That didn't stand out to you?" Martin says. "You're going to just… skip over the part about the zombie cyclops?"

"Something like that doesn't seem out of place in a former Archive," Basira says dismissively. "No, what struck me was the condition of the *inanimate* corpse. Apparently the skin around the body's eye sockets was badly damaged, suggesting that his eyes were gouged out."

"So, what, you think it was a – a follower of the Eye trying to escape?" Martin asks. "Some ancient version of an archival assistant, or something?"

"No, I don't think so," Basira says.

She pauses to excavate a notebook from beneath the jumble of statements on the table. A colorful array of page markers protrude from the top – so many that she has to take a few seconds to thumb through them for the right bookmark.

Jon is halfway to asking whether marking every page as significant might just render such an organization tool entirely useless when he's abruptly reminded of Gertrude's deliberately nonexistent filing system; how she obscured her own intentions and wealth of knowledge behind a veil of feigned disorganization. *Blinding with information overload,* he thinks to himself: give someone a mountain of data to sift through and no direction, and it becomes difficult to distinguish the valuable clues hidden in all the extraneous noise.

Eventually, Basira opens to a page almost entirely covered in notes, starting out in a neat script before devolving into near-illegible scribbles towards the middle of the page. It seems she's tried to map her racing, tangential thoughts via different colored inks and a flowchart of arrows – something Jon himself has been known to do. He can see where her writing grew so feverish that it must have left indents on the underlying pages. The final result is so chaotic a sight that it takes a moment for him to notice–

"Basira," he says, squinting at the page, "is this a cipher?"

“What? Oh – yeah, I didn’t want to make it easy for Magnus to read through my eyes. It isn’t exactly a complex one, but even if he does manage to solve it, or the Eye translates for him, he still won’t be able to get much out of it.” She shrugs, as if none of this is particularly noteworthy. “I don’t write anything down that we can’t afford for him to know, and I’ve been weaving irrelevant details and dead ends into my notes, so he shouldn’t be able to track my train of thought easily. Actually, I’m hoping that hiding it all behind a cipher will make him think that *everything* written here is information worth guarding, even though most of it is a massive red herring.”

“Brilliant,” Daisy says, a crooked smile on her face. Jon is inclined to agree.

“Common sense,” Basira says, but one corner of her mouth quirks up at the praise. “I figured it was as good a distraction as any. Give him an inconsequential code to crack, and he’ll feel like he’s secretly gained an advantage he can gloat over. With any luck, solving it will waste his time *and* stroke his ego.”

“Lull him into a false sense of security?” Daisy asks, still grinning.

“Hopefully. If nothing else, it’ll inconvenience him.” Basira shrugs again, but there’s definitely more than a hint of self-satisfaction in her voice. “He’s fed me enough bad intel. I figure it’s only fair for me to return the favor.”

“Wow,” Martin says with a breathless laugh. “Never knew you could be so vindictive.”

“I prefer acts of petty revenge that yield practical results. Two birds, one stone.” Basira clears her throat, laying Heller’s statement alongside the notebook for reference. “Anyway, Gertrude thought the corpse Heller found might have been one of the Knights Hospitaller of the Order of St. John – likely a remnant of the Alexandrian Crusades circa 1365, which dates it to *way* after the initial destruction of the Serapeum.”

“O…kay,” Martin says slowly. “What does any of that have to do with the People’s Church?”

“Well, Gertrude talks about conflicting historical accounts of the Serapeum’s destruction, suggesting that the assault wasn’t carried out by Christians after all. One source describes the

attackers as 'Those Who Sing the Night.'"

"Which might be an ancient cult worshiping the Dark," Martin realizes aloud.

"Exactly," Basira says excitedly. "In which case, its followers likely attacked the Serapeum because it was a temple to the Beholding. So it *was* a religiously-motivated assault, in a way, but one unrelated to the conflicts between the pagan and Christian populations of 4th century Alexandria."

"I guess that makes sense," Martin says. "I mean, there's a long history of rivalry between the Powers, right?"

"Yes," Jon says. "Or – between their followers, anyway. The Vast and the Buried, for instance. Or the Eye and the Stranger – Knowing versus the Unknowable. And there's a similar animosity between the Eye and the Dark: Seeing versus Unseeing. The Fears are interrelated, but that doesn't stop people from imposing their own interpretations onto them, trying to divine their will–"

" –seeds us with this… aching, impossible desire to change the world, to bring it to us – leaves us to guess and bicker and fight over the hell you can actually do it – we don't think like they do – don't give a toss about your rules or systems – only care about what feels right, what freezes your belly with terror."

"…right," Basira says, taking the reins while Jon regains his bearings, blinking blearily and rubbing at his eyes. "In other words, people adopt the Fears as gods, assume they have insight into their god's mind, and try to fulfill whatever commands they ascribe to it. Over the years, a good number of them have settled on world-changing rituals as a form of worship."

"That trend escalated after Smirke devised his taxonomy," Jon says. "When Rayner talked about a grand ritual, Smirke assumed that all of the other Powers would have one as well, so he set about speculating on how they might be constructed. They weren't the first to attempt such things in pursuit of their gods' favor, but… it *is* where Jonah got the idea from. Without Smirke, it's likely that there never would have been a Watcher's Crown." Jon breathes a bitter laugh. "Between their exclusive little club of esoteric academics and Jurgen Leitner's library, I have to wonder whether Smirke should have identified another distinct Fear – the terror of rich and powerful people with more idle time on their hands than they have scruples."

“You could probably roll that into the Extinction,” Martin says with a huff.

“Well,” Basira says, “regardless of whether there’s any truth to Smirke’s taxonomy or not, or whether or not the Fears have a will of their own, their followers clash. There’s a reason the People’s Church uses the symbolism of a closed eye. If Heller’s statement is anything to go on, that antagonism predates the modern Church. Maybe the eyeless corpse in the Serapeum wandered into the ruins during the sacking of Alexandria, had an encounter with the Eye, and it drove him to blind himself. *Or,*” she continues after a pregnant pause, “maybe Those Who Sing the Night left something behind when they pillaged the Serapeum. It wouldn’t be the first time the Dark blinded its victims.”

“The Sandman,” Martin says grimly.

“Who?” Daisy asks.

“Manifestation of the Dark,” Jon explains. “We have a few statements catalogued referencing it, including one by a Doctor Algernon Moss, given in 1864. He slighted an incarnation of Rayner and it… went very poorly for him. Blinded himself.”

“And there are other statements in that vein,” Basira says. “Between that, and – and Melanie quitting… it all got me thinking: what if we could blind the Eye?”

For a long minute, no one speaks.

“Is that even *possible?”* Daisy asks eventually. “I mean, you’re talking about killing a god, right?”

“I don’t know if I would call it a *god,* per se,” Jon says.

“Okay, *fine.*” Daisy rolls her eyes, deeply familiar with this quibble by now. “Force of nature, or” – she mimics Jon’s voice – *“questionably-sentient metaphysical concept materially*

manifesting itself in this reality." At Jon's indignant scowl, she flashes an unapologetic smile. "Or whatever your pet thesis is right this moment."

"Yes, yes, alright," Jon grumps, rolling his eyes in return.

"Honestly, Sims, you talk yourself in and out of theories like a sleep-deprived, caffeine-addled student hijacking a philosophy class–"

"I don't consume *that* much caffeine," Jon protests. *Anymore,* he adds silently. He judges it wise to *not* address the criticism of his sleep hygiene, and he's well-aware of his ability to channel the persona of a high-strung doctoral student on the brink of burnout.

Daisy snorts. *"That's* the part you take issue with?"

"Well, at least I'm–"

"Hey!" Martin says loudly. "I have a question."

Jon pauses mid-sentence and blinks at him owlishly. Now that everyone is staring at him, Martin blushes and looks away, avoiding eye contact.

"Sorry, I was just wondering – if the Fears are all so connected, could you really take one out of the equation without messing up the whole… I don't know – *fear ecosystem*?"

"I doubt we could actually *kill* the Eye," Basira admits. "Or any of the Fears. But the destruction of the Serapeum, and Gertrude's theory that there have been other Archives throughout history… that suggests that temples – or focal points, or places of power – whatever you want to call them – *those* can be destroyed. The Institute, the Panopticon – it's only the most recent stronghold of the Eye. Destroying it wouldn't banish the Eye from the world, but maybe it could weaken it, or – displace it from *here*, at least. Force it to find a new seat of power."

“At the very least, it might be enough to throw a wrench in Magnus’ plans,” Daisy muses.

“Exactly. It might even hurt him.” Basira looks at Jon. “You said his original body is in the center of the Panopticon, right?”

“Yes, minus his eyes – transplanting them into new victims is how he swaps bodies.”

“Ugh, seriously?” Martin says under his breath, nose wrinkling in disgust.

Paying the side comment no mind, Basira continues her line of questioning: “Is being in that specific location vital to his survival, or is it just a convenient place to hide his body?”

“I… I don’t know,” Jon says. “He’s bound to the Institute, but the nature of that bond – how it was established, the conditions that hold it together, how far-reaching it is… I really can’t say.”

“What about destroying the Panopticon – would that sever his connection to the Eye?”

“I – I – I – I don’t know,” Jon says again, beginning to feel overwhelmed by his back-to-back admissions of ignorance. “Maybe?”

“Might be worth a try,” Daisy says. “Or destroying the Archives, at least. There’s a history of arson plots, isn’t there?”

This is a question Jon can answer, and he seizes the opportunity to dispel his growing sense of inadequacy. He takes a deep breath before launching into a chronicle.

“In 2006, in the aftermath of Agnes Montague’s death, Eugene Vanderstock floated the idea of burning the Institute to the ground as revenge against Gertrude. Regrettably, Arthur Nolan

forbade it. Before that, there was a Rosa Meyer who spent over a decade haunted by an encounter with the Eye. In 1984, she hijacked a delivery van, killed the driver, and loaded the van with several barrels of petrol as part of a plot to burn down the Institute. She was apprehended before she could do so. Then, there was –"

"You aren't going to give us a full rundown of all the people who have contemplated burning this place to the ground, are you?" Basira asks. "I imagine we'll be here all day."

"Sorry," Jon says, self-conscious. "Anyway, uh – the last person to attempt it was Gertrude. Well – arson, anyway. There have been various… *unique* approaches to attacking the Institute over the years." He grimaces. "Personally, I'd have preferred more arson attempts as opposed to destruction by *worms* or *raw meat*–"

Basira clears her throat, no doubt intending to divert another tangent.

"Gertrude, right," Jon says, redirecting. "Her plan was intended to distract Jonah while she made her way to the Panopticon to destroy his original body, but I imagine she fully intended for the Archives to burn. Granted, fire might not be enough to physically destroy the heart of the Panopticon itself – stone and brickwork don't burn as easily as wood and drywall – but the rest of the Institute is very much flammable."

"Most things are, provided you have the proper ignition source," Daisy points out.

"You know, Eli– *Jonah* did get really upset when I started burning statements," Martin says pensively. "I've always wondered if it… actually *hurt* him, somehow?"

"It could have just been the principle of the thing. Destroying knowledge, valuable historical documents, and…" Jon pauses for a measured breath. "He has a tendency to see this place and everything in it as his property. Like a dragon sitting on a hoard. I imagine he took personal offense at the idea of someone damaging it." He flashes Martin a small smile. "Particularly someone he gravely underestimated. He's grown accustomed to knowing more than anyone else in the room, and he doesn't like being reminded that he's not invincible. He sees himself as an aspiring god among mortals. You injured his pride. *And* his superiority complex."

“Good,” Martin says spitefully. “But I hope it hurt more than just his pride. I thought he’d be more focused on the Unknowing, but he showed up not long after I started. Maybe he just coincidentally happened be checking in on me when I started burning statements – or the Eye told him what I was doing – but… what if he could *feel* it? And he didn’t just sound angry, he sounded… alarmed. Distressed.”

“Maybe he was scared the Eye would punish him for letting it happen?” Daisy suggests.

“It’s… possible,” Jon says. “I don’t know for certain.”

“I'm hearing a lot of ‘I don’t knows’ from an Avatar of Knowing,” Basira says. Jon doubts that she intended for it to sting – it sounded more like a light tease than an accusation – but he still only barely suppresses a flinch.

“Some Powers are more difficult for me to Know about than others – the Web and the Dark, for instance,” he says evenly, attempting to disguise his discomfort under a layer of nonchalance. He suspects that it isn’t working, judging by the sympathetic expression on Martin’s face. “The Beholding is… uniquely infuriating in that way. Even at the end of the world.”

“Shouldn’t you be able to Know *more* about it than any of the others?” Daisy asks.

“An Eye can’t see within itself,” Jon says with a shrug. It probably doesn’t help that he’s always had difficulty knowing *himself*. “It makes locating the Panopticon tricky as well. Even now, I would have difficulty navigating the tunnels. It’s a blind spot for me. The first time I made my way to the center of the Panopticon, I only found it because Jonah… called me there. The last time I was there, I found my own way, but… I was much more powerful then.” He rubs absently at the back of his neck, looking down and away. “All eyes, you know.”

“How did Peter find his way?” Martin asks. “You said he took me there last time.”

“He had a map. I assume he got it from Jonah, but I don’t know whether he has it right now, or where we could find it if so.”

“Set all of that aside for now,” Basira says. “My original point was that history suggests it’s possible to destroy the Archives – or its physical location, at least, wherever it happens to be at any given time. That might not *entirely* erase the Eye’s influence from a location, if the creature Heller encountered in the Serapeum is any indication, but… maybe we can neutralize the Panopticon as a seat of power. Eliminate the Institute as a representative of the Beholding. And maybe – just maybe – severing the Institute from the Eye could sever the Institute from Jonah as well.”

“And then we could kill him without risking anyone else’s lives,” Martin says, a bit too enthusiastically. *Apparently he never needed an apocalypse to bring out that thirst for vengeance,* Jon thinks to himself wryly. Martin gives Jon an expectant look. “Right?”

“It’s… *possible*, I suppose,” Jon hedges. “It does make a certain sort of sense. But we don’t have any evidence or precedent to back up that theory. I don’t know the exact nature of the dead man’s switch, so I don’t know whether or how it could be defused.”

He commences an anxious back-and-forth pace as he considers the matter, cane tapping like a metronome against the hard ground.

“Like I said before, I don’t know the details of *how* Jonah is bound to the Institute, which means I have no idea whether those bindings can be broken – let alone whether that could be done without *also* harming everyone else bound to the Institute through him. And I don’t know whether or to what extent Jonah’s survival hinges on the condition of the Panopticon.” Frustrated, he blows a stray lock of hair out of his face. “It’s all just – one giant, convoluted unknown.”

“Yeah, but it might be the only lead we have,” Daisy says.

“We’re never going to know the exact answers to every one of those questions,” Basira says. Jon has to shut his eyes against the kicking-and-screaming jolt of objection from that Beholding-touched part of his mind. “Our best bet is to make educated guesses based off of what we *do* know. Anyway, debating *whether* to destroy the Institute and speculating on what effects that would have is a moot point without a means of destruction. Which is where Sergeant Heller’s statement comes in.” She taps a forefinger against the statement for emphasis. “This is the clearest evidence I’ve come across of a manifestation of the Archives

being destroyed, and although we don't know the details of *how* it was achieved, it seems safe to say that it was carried out by followers of the Dark."

"And you think it could be done again," Daisy says.

"Yes. And I have an idea of where we can look for a weapon."

Jon stops short in his pacing, nearly tripping over his own feet.

"The Dark Sun," he murmurs, eyes widening in realization.

Basira nods. "You said it was darkness given form. That looking at it would be enough to destroy most people."

"Yes," Jon says distractedly, running a hand through his hair. "The only ones who could bear the sight of it were Rayner, Manuela Dominguez, and Natalie Ennis. And me, I suppose, but – for me, it was sort of a… a sudden-death staring contest with the concept of unknowable darkness."

And it was one of the most riveting things that Jon has ever laid eyes upon. By now, he's well-acquainted with the general experience of being unable to look away, but the Dark Sun was something else entirely.

The Eye cannot tolerate – perhaps cannot even comprehend, if it has any conscious thought at all – the experience of being unable to Know or See something. The Dark Sun is by definition and design unseeable, but paradoxically forced into a state of observability. Such a thing is so inimical to the Beholding's essence as to be corrosive, and yet it is not within the Eye's nature to tear its gaze away, even from that which would be its undoing. Confronted with something as-yet-unknown, Jon could do nothing but drink it in – an inescapable, instinctive attempt to add to a rapacious Watcher's catalogue of terrible knowledge at any cost.

“It’s like a – like a black hole,” he says, staring absently into the middle distance, “but instead of just swallowing light, it swallows the ability to See, the very concept of Knowing–”

“ –a time of holy darkness – when the Eye will close forever – destroyed by the radiance of the Dark Sun – the Forever Blind–”

“–forcing the observer to see that which cannot be seen until they can no longer endure nor fathom the curse of seeing–”

“Stay with us,” Martin interrupts, taking Jon’s hand again. “You’re getting a bit… you know. Ominous.”

Jon can *hear* the individual words, but they skate over and slide out of his mind one at a time without integrating into something meaningful.

“–you try your hardest to eradicate, flood your surroundings with light, but it’s always there at the edges, waiting for the glow to weaken, to return and cover you forever–”

“–the darkness pressed in, and seemed to fill my mouth, my nose – it did not touch my eyes–”

“–I wanted to turn around and run back to the light, but not enough. Not as much as I wanted to overcome my fear–”

“–but I know better now. There is far more to the darkness than simply being unable to see–”

“–that cold, hateful gloom – never really left my mind–”

“Hey,” Martin says, louder, cupping the side of Jon’s face. “Look at me. *Jon.*”

Their eyes finally meet, and that’s enough to snap Jon out of the trance.

“S-sorry,” Jon stammers. He isn’t entirely clear on what it is he’s apologizing for, though. Momentary disorientation seems to have scaled his short-term memory down to fractions of a second. “I, ah… where was I?”

“The Dark Sun,” Basira prompts.

“Ah. R-right.” Shaking his head, Jon tries to nudge the jumble of thoughts in his head into some sort of order. He spends a full minute staring at his hands, studying the way his fingers flex and rub together, before he recognizes them as his own. It takes another moment for him to replay the last few minutes of the conversation and pick up the thread where he left off. “The Dark Sun. Right. Yes. I managed to outlast it, but not without a cost.”

“What was the cost?” Martin says apprehensively.

“Aside from being marked? It was… I don’t know. Even now, it’s – difficult to wrap my head around? I can remember how it *felt* – sort of like… like anaphylaxis for the soul? But made worse by my connection to the Eye. Like every atom of me was balking at its mere existence. That sense memory is *there*, but the ability to fully grasp it, to – to hold it in my conscious mind long enough to make *sense* of it…” Jon blows out a slow breath through his nose. “Trying to recall it is like trying to see through total darkness, and–” He shakes his head again. “I should – I should probably stop looking at it, actually. Feeling a bit lightheaded.”

“And you described all of *that* as ‘not that bad’?” Martin cries, his voice pitching higher in indignation.

“Comparatively not that bad,” Jon mumbles, lowering his gaze.

Martin makes a disapproving noise in his throat. Then he places a hand under Jon’s chin, tilting his head up to stare into Jon’s eyes with sudden intensity.

“What?” Jon asks nervously.

“Your pupils are different sizes again,” Martin sighs. “Sit down.”

Knowing better than to argue, Jon complies, taking a seat in the nearest chair. Martin pulls another chair over for himself, sitting close enough for their knees to touch – a grounding

point of contact for both of them.

“What would happen if we exposed the Panopticon to the Dark Sun?” Basira asks.

“What would happen if we dropped the manifestation of unknowability into our reality’s physical analog to the pupil of the Eye, you mean?” Jon says, eyebrows raised. “I… have no idea.”

“The Dark Sun lost a staring contest with you, though,” Martin says hesitantly. “Wouldn’t it lose against the Eye, too?”

“I won a staring contest against the Eye once,” Jon says vaguely.

“What?”

“The circumstances were unique. I was stronger then, and the Panopticon was already beginning to crumble. The whole world was. Also, I had quite a few more eyes at the time–”

“What?” Martin repeats. “As in, physically?”

“–and it’s entirely possible that the Eye only blinked because it was bored,” Jon continues, only half listening. “But it’s not important. Or even pertinent. Point is, Basira’s logic is sound.”

“So you think this could work, then,” Daisy says.

“I – I don’t know, I – again, it’s difficult for me to See *anything* where the Dark is concerned – by definition, really – but I… *maybe?”* Jon shuts his eyes with a sigh. “I don’t *Know* what precisely would happen if we brought a focus of pure, concentrated Darkness into the Eye’s inner sanctum, but… I can’t imagine it would do *nothing.* And it’s the closest thing to a concrete plan that we’ve had yet.”

“Which means you have to go to Ny-Ålesund again,” Martin says quietly.

“Yes,” Jon says.

“Are you really sure you should be traveling?” Basira’s tone is neutral, but Jon can detect the unspoken question there: *Will you be able to control yourself out there in a sea of potential victims?*

“No, I’m not,” Jon confesses, “but I don’t think we have another option. You can’t go alone. Even if you did manage to sneak into the warehouse without confronting Manuela, chances are slim that you could survive seeing the Dark Sun. And even if you could, I have no idea how to safely transport the thing to London.” He bites his lip. “I think we *have* to consult Manuela if we’re to stand any chance of succeeding.”

“You think you can force her to help us?” Basira asks.

“I doubt it. She’s quite strong-willed. I, uh… I was actually hoping to *persuade* her to help us.”

“Sounds like a long shot,” Daisy says. “She’s dedicated her life to a cult, right? Zealots don’t abandon their faith easily.”

“It doesn’t necessarily require her to betray her patron,” Jon says. “I think I might be able to convince her if I frame it right. Given enough time, she might eventually try to carry on Rayner’s legacy, but right now, she’s not in the state of mind for rebuilding. She’s despondent, she lost her purpose, she has no idea what to do next – but she’s also *angry,* and if I present her with an opportunity for revenge… well, she might take me up on that. She assumes Gertrude was responsible for both Rayner’s death and the collapse of the Extinguished Sun. And she doesn’t yet know that Gertrude is dead. Once she realizes she can’t go after Gertrude anymore, she might be willing to settle for a surrogate.”

“Yeah, and *you’re* going to be the closest target,” Martin objects. “It’s like Michael all over again.”

“Yes,” Jon says, mollifying, “but I can offer her something better.”

“The Institute,” Basira says.

“Exactly.”

“You think she’d stoop so low as to cooperate with people aligned with the Eye?” Basira asks skeptically. “In her statement about the Daedalus mission, her hatred for the Eye sounded personal. Like it went way deeper than a vendetta against Gertrude or the Institute.”

“That’s actually *why* I think she’ll hear us out,” Jon replies. “As a disciple of the Dark, the Beholding is inherently repulsive to her. I’m sure she’ll find it distasteful, working with us. But her hatred of any one subordinate of the Eye pales in comparison to her hatred of the Eye itself. She knows she doesn’t stand a chance against the Beholding itself, of course – but its seat of power would be the next best thing.”

“Resentment is a powerful motivator,” Martin says.

Jon nods in agreement. “She’s also patient, she has a mind for careful planning, and she’s more than willing to make sacrifices in pursuit of a greater purpose.”

“Would she really trust us, though?” Basira asks.

“No. But she doesn’t have to. I doubt she’ll immediately take us at our word, but if we can convince her that this really is an ‘enemy of my enemy’ situation… well, I think she’ll consider the indignity of a temporary alliance with us if it means she can strike a blow against the true source of the power behind the Institute.”

“I don’t like this,” Martin mutters.

“Neither do I,” Jon admits. “But it’s the nearest we’ve had to a direction in weeks, and the longer we wait to act, the more time Jonah has to scheme. As far as he knows, he still needs to orchestrate the marks of the Lonely, the Slaughter, the Flesh, and the Dark. He’s already set me up for the Dark, and the Lonely has a foothold in the Institute, but I’m not sure what he’s planning for the last two now that his initial plans didn’t pan out.

“Last time, the Slaughter mark went according to plan, but this time he’s lost Melanie as a means. The Flesh attack that was intended for me happened prematurely, but last time I ended up going to Jared on my own. Practically asked for it,” Jon says scathingly, “same as I did with Jude Perry and Mike Crew. Jonah didn’t even *need* to come up with a plan B–”

“*–you should have seen my face when you voluntarily went to him – a very pleasant surprise – it does tickle me, that in this world of would-be occult dynasties and ageless monsters, the chosen one is simply that: someone I chose. It’s not in your blood, or your soul, or your destiny. It’s just in your own rotten luck–”*

“Jon,” Martin says warningly, bringing the statement to a screeching halt. “I don’t *care* what Jonah’s tried to put in your head, he’s *wrong*.”

“Not about all of it,” Jon mutters. At the sound of his own voice, dull panic floods his thoughts.

“You’ve said yourself that he won’t quit,” Martin says. “And he’s made it so you *can’t* quit. He had you trapped and he was just going to keep trying until he got it right, no matter what you did.”

And that hasn’t changed, has it?

“He’s been – he’s been playing this game for over two centuries,” Jon says weakly, pulse stuttering in his throat. Anxiety spikes as he hears himself speak, and he lowers his voice to a near-whisper. “He’s going to – he’s going to *keep* playing it until he wins. H-how – how is it supposed to go any differently this time, when he’s still–”

“We go on the offensive,” Basira interrupts. “Magnus might have a way to cheat conventional mortality, but he’s not invulnerable. And he might have his own secrets, but so do we. He only *thinks* he holds all the cards – and that’s to our advantage. It makes him cocky.”

“We’ve taken him by surprise before,” Martin says. “We can do it again.”

“And hopefully rub his nose in it,” Daisy says with a smirk.

“Jon,” Basira says. She waits until she catches his eye before she continues. “I think this plan is worth trying. And from what you’ve told us about your future, it sounds like every time one of us tried to go it alone, it backfired.”

“It did,” Jon murmurs with a humorless laugh. “Horribly.”

“So we need to adjust our strategy, and…” Basira sighs. “I could use your help on this one.”

She’s staring directly at him, but it still takes a minute for Jon to register that she’s addressing *him.* Asking *him* for help; offering *him* an inch of trust. Slowly, he nods.

“Good,” Basira says. “Then let’s decide on a plan of attack.”

When Georgie visits the Institute a few days later, the first thing she does is sweep Jon into a crushing hug. Within the next half-hour, she’s standing in the tunnel with her arms crossed, looking from Jon to Basira with doubt writ large on her face as they brief her on their plans.

“You’re sure about this?” Georgie asks yet again, staring Jon down.

“As sure as I can be,” he says. “Honestly, I have no idea whether it will work, but… I think it’s worth a try. Better than doing nothing and just… sitting here waiting for the next crisis to arise.”

Georgie hesitates for a moment before asking, “Will you be alright traveling? You haven’t left this building in months. You barely leave the *basement*.”

Jon glances at Basira before looking back to Georgie.

“We’ll be… taking precautions,” he says slowly. “Avoiding crowds, traveling during off-hours, and… I’ll be wearing a blindfold whenever we’re in public. Daisy’s lending me a pair of noise-cancelling headphones, too. It won’t stop me Knowing things, but hopefully it will keep me from overhearing people’s private conversations.” He scuffs his foot against the floor, averting his eyes. “Keep my, uh – *curiosity* at bay, so to speak.”

“What about statements?” Georgie asks. “Is Daisy going with you?”

“Daisy doesn’t feel like it’s safe for her to leave here,” Basira says quietly. “Even if we do run into a situation where we could use her help, she isn’t exactly in fighting shape, and…”

“Last time she let the Hunt in, she didn’t come back,” Jon says. “It’s not worth the risk. Basira and I went to Ny-Ålesund on our own last time; we should be fine. I’ll bring some old statements to hold me over. Daisy will give me a new one before we leave. Worse comes to worst, and depending on how long we’re gone, she can give me one over the phone while we’re away.”

“Okay,” Georgie sighs. “Will she be okay here alone?”

“Martin is staying behind,” Jon says.

“Really?” Georgie says, eyebrows raised.

“Neither of us are happy about that, believe me,” Jon says, clasping his hands tightly together. “But he’s worried about what Peter might get up to if he’s gone, and… I know how Manuela reacted to Basira and me last time, but I can’t predict what adding a third person to the mix would do. And… Daisy could use some company.”

“Aren’t things sort of… well, *fraught* between them?” Georgie asks.

“I wouldn’t call them friends by any stretch of the imagination, but… they’ve coexisted in the same space for a few weeks now.”

“Martin glares at her less,” Basira adds.

“And the Lonely?” Georgie asks. “How is he doing with that?”

“Good days and bad days,” Jon says. “But he says he’s made his choice; that the Lonely’s not what he wants. I imagine Peter will hone in on him again as soon as I’m gone, but… he won’t outright cast him into the Lonely. He needs Martin to choose it of his own accord. And Peter’s bound to play more mind games, but Martin has stood up to him before, and Daisy will be here, and I’ll be checking in, and – and – and he knows he can contact me if he needs.” He takes a deep breath. “Though I – I expect cell service might be unreliable in some of the more remote areas.”

“Hm. Well, he can always call me if he needs.” Georgie exhales heavily. *“Please* be careful, will you?”

“We will,” Jon promises. “If all goes well, we shouldn’t be gone long.”

Though he suspects the return trip should take longer than it did last time. Even if Helen does offer a shortcut again, Jon has had enough exposure to the Spiral’s various domains for several lifetimes. He has no desire to brave yet another foray into the Distortion’s corridors.

Georgie's visit doesn't last much longer after that. Although Melanie is slowly but surely gaining independence, Georgie prefers not to leave her alone for too long just yet. When the three of them emerge from the tunnels, though, they're greeted with an unexpected sight: Daisy and Martin are both standing at the bottom of the stairs between the Archives and the rest of the Institute, blocking the doorway – and the figure standing in it.

"Oliver?" Jon says.

If Jon isn't mistaken, Oliver looks more than a little relieved to see him.

"Is this a bad time…?" Oliver ventures.

Before Jon can answer, Georgie takes a step forward, scowling. "What are *you* doing here?"

"I, uh–"

"I invited him," Jon blurts out.

Martin turns around. "You what?"

"I *did* say as much," Oliver says under his breath.

"Shut it," Daisy growls, bristling.

"A few months back, he visited me in the hospital," Jon explains, fidgeting nervously under the scrutiny of everyone in the room. "He's the one who helped me wake up, and – he had some questions that I couldn't quite answer at the time, where Elias could be listening in. So I invited him to come to the Institute, where we could discuss things in the tunnels. And I, ah – I sort of… forgot about it," he finishes sheepishly. "Until just now."

“Jon,” Georgie says tersely, “a word?”

“R-right,” Jon says with a wince, but she’s already turned on her heel, heading off in the direction of the tunnels.

“I’m coming too,” Martin announces, still glaring askance at Oliver.

“Right,” Jon says again. “Of course. Oliver, do you mind, uh – do you mind waiting here for a few minutes?”

“I suppose not,” Oliver says, eyeing Daisy warily. Not with *fear,* per se; just based on Jon’s limited interactions with him, he suspects that Oliver’s discomfort comes more from a place of social anxiety than anything else.

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” Basira says coolly. Indeed, she hasn’t taken her eye off Oliver this entire time.

“That – really isn’t necessary,” Jon says. “He’s not here as an enemy.”

“Sure,” Basira says, sounding unconvinced – but she does put a restraining hand on Daisy’s shoulder to pacify her.

“Jon?” Georgie calls impatiently from down the hall.

Sorry, Jon mouths apologetically at Oliver before turning and following after Georgie with Martin in tow.

He *really* isn’t looking forward to whatever scolding Georgie has queued up for him.

Chapter End Notes

Jon, way back in Chapter 6: Boy, I sure do hope Georgie and Martin are okay with me inviting the grim reaper to my place of work.
Jon, now: [surprisedpikachu.jpg]

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- Citations for Jon's Archive-speak are as follows: MAG 140; 145; 135; 143/098/109/098/086; and, of course, 160.

- Okay, so! Obviously I'm taking some wild liberties with TMA canon/lore with this latest plot development. So far I've tried to comply with established canon for S1-S4 (and parts of S5) at least, but this is an AU and I'm giving myself some wiggle room. I'm hoping Basira's logic here doesn't outright contradict canon, but it's been a couple months since my last full series relisten, so admittedly I could be overlooking some details. Either way, I'm running with it, lol.

- Confession: The way I described Basira's notebook? Arrows and scribbles and enough highlighting to bleed through to the next page? Absolutely a callout post for myself. Except where Basira's & Gertrude's (dis)organization systems serve a deliberate and clever purpose, for me it's just that I take copious notes, half of which are just tangential thoughts; and highlighting as I go makes it easier to focus on what I'm reading. Does highlighting nearly all the text defeat the purpose of highlighting? Yes. Are my notes and textbooks nonetheless a technicolor mess? Always.

- Speaking of Basira, I thought she deserved a turn with the infodumping,,, as a treat

- I realize Daisy only uses puns, what, once or twice in canon??? But I've decided that she delights in dropping deliberately bad puns specifically to annoy Jon. Just like I decided Basira's an astronomy nerd. I honestly don't know why I started headcanoning that but it FEELS right.

- I stand by Jon's statement that academia is just Like That. It absolutely gives me life every time I come across a peer review that contains the words "my esteemed colleague(s)" or something similar in the context of bashing some other author's study. That fake-polite, thinly veiled sarcasm is just *chef's kiss* petty as hell and I love to see it.

- As always, thank you for reading! (I haven't gotten to responding to the comments on the last chapter just yet, but I'll probably get to it over the next couple of days. <3)

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

Routes and Detours

Chapter Summary

An examination of endings and how to realize them.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings for Chapter 24: brief claustrophobia; some RSD/fear of abandonment stuff; extensive discussion of death (this chapter's all about Terminus, babey); allusions to past suicidal ideation on Jon's part; mentions of eye gouging/blinding (not graphic); some internalized victim blaming; anxiety symptoms; spider mentions; swears.
Let me know if I missed anything!

Oh, and. This ended up being. A very long chapter. Probably could've split it into two, but. Well. Here we are.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chronic fear has been Jon's baseline for so long, it's difficult for him to conceptualize what he would be were it to abandon him. In some ways, he's become acclimated to it. On the other hand, fear is a volatile, prolific thing, its many shades relentlessly coalescing and mutating to form new strains. It all but guarantees that the Eye will never truly be sated: there will always be some heretofore unknown species of terror to discover, experience, and add to its collection.

Sprinkled in amongst the more noteworthy moments of abject terror and the constant background pressure of existential dread, there are smaller fears: everyday anxieties; pervasive insecurities; acute spikes of panic and adrenaline. Each discrete instance may pale in comparison to life-threatening peril, but muddled together and given time to ferment, they compound. They feed into one another. Sometimes, they come to attract the attention of larger, far more forbidding monsters.

In this way, Jon is no different from the average person – and one of the oldest, most deep-rooted of those comparatively banal fears is his fear of rejection, of disappointing, of being

seen and found lacking. It guided his path long before his first supernatural encounter, and in many ways, it still does. His self-awareness of that fact does little to dampen its influence.

So it's vexing, but not *surprising,* that the foremost concern vying for his attention right now is whether this might be that final straw that chases Georgie away for good. She sits with her hands clasped in front of her mouth, eyes closed and brow furrowed as she gathers her thoughts. The longer she remains silent, the more time Jon has to run through all the worst-case scenarios.

It's already difficult for him to capture a full breath under the crushing weight of anticipation. It doesn't help that his intermittent claustrophobia has decided that *right now* is the perfect time to manifest. A tunnel collapse would probably damage the Archives above it, though, and there's no way Jon would be so lucky. He isn't sure whether to consider that a consolation or not.

Finally, Georgie takes a breath, opens her eyes, and leans forward.

"Okay." She tilts her folded hands towards him in an indicative gesture. "Explain, please."

"Right," Jon says, rubbing one arm nervously. "S-so, Oliver–"

"I knew his name wasn't Antonio," Georgie mutters.

"No. That was an alias he used when he first came to the Institute to give a statement, back in 2015."

"The prediction about Gertrude's death?" Martin asks.

"The same."

“And what was a harbinger of death doing looming over you while you were in a coma?” Georgie presses.

“I don’t know that I’d call him a *harbinger*–” Jon’s mouth snaps shut immediately when Georgie shoots him an impatient glare. “He wasn’t – he wasn’t trying to – to *reap my soul* or anything like that, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Then why was he there?”

“He was called there,” Jon says. “By the Web, according to him.”

“Oh, and you don’t think that makes him *dangerous?”* Martin says, throwing one arm out in a surge of exasperation.

“He isn’t *allied* with the Web,” Jon replies, fiddling with the hem of his jumper. “It just… got into his head, and it was easier for him to go along with it, rather than fight it indefinitely. Oliver tends to have a fatalistic outlook. If he sees something as inevitable, he’s not inclined to try to stop it.”

“So, what – he’s serving an evil power not because he’s sadistic but because he’s just *apathetic?”* Georgie couldn’t sound any more unimpressed if she tried. “How is that any better?”

“It’s, ah… it’s really not that simplistic,” Jon says, adopting a delicate tone. “And I don’t think I’d call it apathy so much as…”

“Acceptance,” Georgie says stiffly. “Everything has an ending.”

“Yes. Oliver is an Avatar of the End, and the End is characterized by its certainty–” Jon pauses when he catches a glimpse of Georgie’s hands, fastened to her knees and trembling with tension. “We don’t have to talk about this.”

“No, I–” Georgie sighs, relaxes her grip, and flexes her fingers. “Just – tell me why you invited him here.”

“It’s like I said upstairs – there were things I couldn’t tell him about outside of here.”

“Why do you feel the need to tell him *anything?”* Martin asks.

“I just thought… he might be able to help us.”

“Why would he,” Georgie asks, “if he’s so fatalistic?”

“Because, he…” Jon hesitates, biting his lip. “I suppose I thought that maybe – maybe he’s like me.”

“He’s nothing like you,” Martin says vehemently.

A flicker of a smile crosses Jon’s face. “You don’t even know him.”

“What, and you do?”

“Not *well*,” Jon admits. “But I do think I understand him.”

Martin crosses his arms, transparently miffed. In an attempt to suppress his amusement, Jon presses his lips tightly together. It doesn’t work, evidently.

“What?” There’s a flat, defensive edge to the demand, highlighted by a suspicious scowl. “What’s with the smirk?”

Jon already knows the answer to the question he wants to ask, but he can't help himself: "Are you *jealous?"*

"No!" Martin yelps. "Why would I be jealous?"

Jon shakes his head, chuckling softly. "Well, you don't need to be."

"I'm not!"

"If you say so," Jon says with a shrug and a sly grin.

"I am *not* jealous," Martin insists – and now Georgie is snickering, one hand clamped over her mouth to (unsuccessfully) stifle the sound. Martin glowers at her, betrayed.

"Sorry, sorry," she says. "Just – didn't realize you were *quite* so jealous."

"I'm *not*," Martin says for a third time. "But – but even if I *was,* I would be completely justified."

"Because he woke me up," Jon says, toning down the smugness now.

There is an uneasy boundary between affectionate teasing and perceived mockery, and here in the past, he hasn't quite mapped the shape of that line. Between seeing one another in the Lonely and anchoring each other through the apocalypse, he and Martin had been forced to confront long-held insecurities about themselves, both as individuals and as a unit. That shared history no longer applies. While Jon has no desire to repeat that chain of events – there are happier, *healthier* pathways to a relationship than bonding via trauma, or so he's heard – it does mean that this version of Martin hasn't yet had the same epiphanies.

Much like Jon, Martin struggles to take a declaration of love at its word. People lie; they mislead; they say what they think others want to hear – whether out of self-interest, sympathy, or simple social ineptitude, the results are the same. Sometimes they start out sincere, but little by little, their tolerance dwindles and they recognize their mistake: what they thought was genuine affection was at best a passing fancy for someone who turned out to be far more trouble than they were ever worth. Or worse: a caring façade born of pity or guilt or obligation, only to turn rotten and toxic when the burden grows too tiresome.

Add all of those deep-seated convictions to the lasting influence of the Lonely, and Martin needed *proof* before he could entertain the possibility of being loved. Following him into and then leading him out of the Lonely was a fairly convincing statement. Absent another life-or-death gesture to act as a catalyst, Jon suspects that this time around, building that confidence will come down to time, practice, and repetition.

"Okay, yeah, about that – what does that – what does that *mean,* he woke you up?" Before Jon can get a word out, Martin barrels on: "I mean, what makes *him* so special? I spent weeks – *weeks* – begging you to come back, and *nothing.* He visits you *once* and suddenly you're *fine?"*

"I really did try to come back on my own," Jon says – not accusing, not pleading, not even self-flagellating. Just plain, sincere assuredness. "I heard you calling me. Not at first, but – the last time you visited. It was the first time I'd heard your voice in… in so long, I – I never thought I'd hear it again, and then you were *there,* and I was – I was so *relieved,* so… so *elated.*"

Martin sulks quietly, glaring at the floor, but there's a noticeable flush staining his cheeks now.

"And then – and then I heard you on the phone with Peter, and…" Jon swallows hard, the despair he felt in that moment still stark in his mind. "I tried to call out to you, but you couldn't hear me. The Lonely was drawing you in, just like before, and there was *nothing* I could do. I wanted to wake up more than anything, but I just… couldn't figure out how. I still don't know *why* – I don't know the exact mechanics of it all – but for whatever reason, I wasn't able to wake up until Oliver's visit. Same as the first time."

At that, Martin seems to deflate somewhat, finally looking up to meet Jon's eyes.

“If I could have come back sooner,” Jon continues, smiling sadly, “I would have. In a heartbeat.”

Martin pouts for a moment longer before surrendering, his rigid posture slackening as the rancor drains out of him.

“Yeah,” he sighs. “Yeah, I know.”

“So you think you owe him,” Georgie guesses. “For waking you up.”

“Partially,” Jon admits. “But that’s not why I invited him, really. He just seems… I don’t know. Lonely, I guess?” Georgie rolls her eyes. “He never – he never *asked* to be a death prophet. No more than I wanted to be a – a *trauma leech.* And arguably – arguably he was even *less* to blame for what happened to him than I am for what *I’ve* become–”

“Jon,” Martin says warningly.

“No, just – just listen.” Jon takes a measured breath as he puts his thoughts in order. “Oliver started having prophetic dreams several years ago. Just – out of the blue. As far as I know, he did nothing to tempt fate. Eventually, those dreams carried over into the waking world. Everywhere he went, every single day, he could see the evidence of imminent death. There was no escaping it.

“In the beginning, he tried to help people. But it never worked. When he was unable to save his own father, he stopped trying to change fate, for the most part. I think the last time he tried was when he dreamed of Gertrude. He saw how far-reaching her death would ultimately be, and he tried to warn her, even though he didn’t have much hope that it would make a difference. And he was right, in the end. He couldn’t save her, and he couldn’t prevent what came after.”

“So he just… gave up,” Martin says flatly.

“When you fail over and over again to do good in the world, when you witness horror after horror with no recourse to stop it, when you try again and again and *again* to escape and never even come close… at some point, you burn out,” Jon murmurs. “Lose all hope. It becomes your new normal. Exist like that long enough and you start to become numb to it all.”

“You lived through an apocalypse and *you* didn’t give up,” Martin counters.

“I did, though,” Jon says quietly.

Martin frowns. “What?”

“After I lost you.” Jon averts his eyes and folds his arms tight against his middle, holding his elbows. “I was lost. I couldn’t save anyone, I couldn’t change anything, I couldn’t even *look away.* I wasn’t allowed to sleep. I wasn’t allowed to *die*. So I just… survived, even though I wanted anything but.” When he glances up, he sees that Martin’s expression has softened. “You were my reason. Then you were gone, and I was alone.”

Jon hadn’t known that the world could end a second time, but there it was. With Martin gone, what little that remained of Jon’s own microcosm shattered. Yet the Ceaseless Watcher’s world dared to continue turning, to go on churning out horror after horror as if nothing at all had changed. And Jon was just another cog in that machine, going through the motions and fulfilling the purpose for which he was cultivated.

It wasn’t *truly* ceaseless, of course. Everything has an ending. But it *felt* like an eternity – and for Jon, indefinite waiting has always been a special kind of torture.

“So what changed?” Georgie asks, her tone gentler than before.

“For a while, nothing,” Jon says. “I sort of… drifted. Wandered aimlessly through the domains for… I don’t really know. When nothing ever changes, keeping track of time becomes pointless. The Panopticon kept trying to draw me in, of course, but I – I suppose there was still enough spite left in me to make a show of ignoring it.

“At some point, I got lost in a Lonely domain. Which was fine, really. Or – it *would* have been fine, had I been allowed to succumb to it. I wanted to just – fade into it, let it in, but” – Jon breathes a bitter laugh – “it wouldn’t take me. Wouldn’t let me go numb, wouldn’t let me forget – didn’t have the decency to let me disappear, no matter how long I stayed.”

No one got what they deserved in that future, but this was a rare exception to that rule: to be allowed to simply *forget* his role in creating that nightmare world, to sink into blissful ignorance, would have been a miscarriage of justice. Not that the Eye cared about what was just or fair, of course. No, it simply would not – perhaps *could* not – deign to relinquish its hold on its Archive.

“But the longer I stayed,” he continues, looking at Martin now, “the more I thought about you. In retrospect, maybe that’s why I didn’t want to leave. And maybe that’s part of why it wouldn’t have me – I couldn’t let you go. But being there, it kept reminding me of the first Lonely domain we came across after the change. We were separated, and I was – I was so afraid you wouldn’t come back to me. But you did.” Jon smiles to himself, remembering the relief and gratitude and *awe* he felt in that moment. “You rejected the Lonely all on your own. Found your own way out – found *me,* and… every time I thought about that, I imagined your voice in my head. Telling me off for wallowing. For giving up.”

“Sounds like I would have been justified,” Martin says delicately.

“You would have,” Jon confesses with a contrite half-smile. “I was in *peak* brooding condition. Eventually I wore myself out wallowing *there*, though, so I left to go wallow somewhere else. I needed a change of scenery, and – well, I got one. Stumbled into a Spiral domain. Ran into Helen, and… funny enough, that was the last straw.”

Jon can still recall the encounter down to the smallest detail.

‘Still drifting aimless, are we?’ Helen bared an unsettling number of teeth as her grin stretched – literally – from ear to ear. ‘Exactly how long do you plan on moping about, Archivist?’

Jon did not answer; did not even meet her eyes, instead staring vacantly over her shoulder. The incessant reel of horror scenes playing in the back of his mind made it difficult to focus

on any one thing at a time, and there was nothing he cared to see so much that it was worth the effort it would take to grant it his undivided attention.

'You know,' Helen said, tapping an elongated, crooked finger against her lips, 'I wonder what he would say, if he could see you now.'

It didn't matter. Martin was gone. Those parts of the world that hadn't already been thoroughly razed were slowly but surely withering. There was nothing left to salvage.

'Disappointed, I imagine,' Helen continued, distant and muffled by the din of a splintering world. (Somewhere deep below their feet, a man was screaming himself hoarse in a labyrinth made of mirrors and fog.) 'But not surprised*. It's not the first time you've let him down, is it?'*

Jon gave a listless shrug. Her words stung, certainly, but they were a far cry from some of her more artful jabs. A pointed insinuation to send him spiraling into his own self-destructive conclusions would always be more corrosive than outright disparagement.

(The man in the maze gazed into mirror after mirror, hoping to find himself within. In every one, his reflection had no face.)

That said, Helen wasn't wrong. Even as a child, Jon had always been a burden. He never did manage to prove himself worthy of all the many unwilling sacrifices made on his behalf. Never measured up; never put nearly enough good into the world to balance out the cost of having him in it.

(The man in the maze had misplaced his name. Did he drop it somewhere? He checked his pockets only to find holes. Yet another eyeless reflection stared back at him from beneath his feet.)

'You were always headed here, weren't you?'

Yes.

(The man in the maze tried to retrace his steps, but everything looked the same: an endless, recursive corridor of mirror images. He asked one of the doppelgängers for directions, only to realize that the man in the mirror had no mouth with which to answer.)

'To think – all that time he spent coaxing you along, and you crumble the moment you don't have a prop to coddle you.' Helen cackled, high and cruel. 'What a waste.'

She wasn't telling him anything that he didn't already know.

(The man in the maze was scouring the mirrored ground, searching for… something he'd lost; he couldn't quite remember, but he knew that it was important. He checked his pockets, only to discover that he had no pockets.)

'Although, I guess the blame doesn't fall squarely on your shoulders. He was naïve. It isn't your *fault he was foolish enough to hope for–'*

The words jolted Jon back to the present like an electric shock. Whatever else Helen had to say, he'd never know. He tuned her out, and he started walking.

"She was having a go at me – nothing new there – but then she brought *you* into it, and…" Jon shrugs. "I don't think it was her intention, but it nudged me back on track. You and I had a plan, before, and… honestly, I didn't have much hope that it would work, but you had. That made it worth trying."

It wasn't like Jon could break the world *more* by parleying with the Eye. At worst, it made no difference, but at least Jon did something to honor Martin's memory; at best, it put Jon out of his misery, one way or another.

"I'm glad I did, because… well, it changed things, obviously. You were right."

“Sorry,” Martin says with unmistakable self-satisfaction, “could you say that again?”

“You were *right,* Martin.” Jon rolls his eyes, but the effect is undercut by an indulgent smile he can’t quite repress. “You often are. All of this is to say – I’m only here because you gave me a reason to be. If not for that, then… well, I meant what I’ve said before, about needing a lifeline in order to stand any chance against the Fears. I was – I *am* lucky enough to have one.”

More than one, he thinks with a sense of wonder. The support he has now is such a far cry from the ostracism he experienced the first time he was here. It still gives him pause every time he dwells on the contrast. Sometimes, it seems too good to be true.

“Oliver didn’t,” Jon continues. “It’s hard to begrudge him for resigning himself to fate, especially considering how the power that claimed him is *defined* by fatalism. He never asked to be chosen, he was given no hope of escape, and he had no one to reach out to, let alone anyone to reach back. It’s unsurprising that he would come to accept the inescapable when the only anchor he had was the certainty of oblivion.”

“‘The moment that you die will feel exactly the same as this one,’” Georgie says quietly.

Jon nods. “And without a dependable reason to see the moments in between as significant, it’s… hard to see the point in anything. I’ve been there.”

As has Georgie, Jon knows. She exhales heavily, massaging her temples, visibly conflicted.

“I still don’t think you should trust him,” Martin says.

“I’m not suggesting we trust him wholesale,” Jon says, “but I’m certain that he isn’t an enemy. He might not resist the End, but he doesn’t work to end the world in its name, either. He’s… thoroughly neutral.”

“Then what makes you think he’ll lift a finger to help?” Martin asks.

“I doubt he’ll go out of his way to help,” Jon admits. “He might be willing to trade information, though. I just thought… Avatar of the End – he would have more insight into the limits of Jonah’s supposed ‘immortality’ than I do.”

“You think he can tell you something about the dead man’s switch,” Georgie guesses, rubbing at her forehead.

“That’s my hope, yes. He can see the route that a person will take to their end. Or, he can when their death is imminent, at least – I’m not sure how far into the future his foresight stretches these days.”

In the hospital, Oliver implied that he could see *something* in Jon’s vicinity. Whether that suggests Jon’s own end is near enough for Oliver to foresee it, Jon does not Know. Given his proven resilience, he suspects it’s just as likely to be a quirk of his strange existence. There’s no shortage of idiosyncrasies that may mark Jon as an outlier: he’s the Archivist; he’s traveled through a rift in time; he’s the primed and practiced focal point of the Watcher’s Crown, and the fate of the world hinges on his ability to keep that potential in check.

And if his situation *is* an exception to the rule, perhaps Jonah’s is as well.

“Maybe he’ll be able to see whether our routes flow into Jonah’s, so to speak,” Jon says. “When Oliver dreamed of Gertrude’s impending death, he saw how much of the world’s fate was intertwined with hers–”

“–the veins, whose domination of the dreamscape had only ever been partial before, had thickened and now seemed to cover almost the whole space of every street – the destination – into which all the veins flowed – The Magnus Institute – choked with that shadowed flesh – following that red light that would now pulse so bright that I knew were I to see it awake it would have blinded me – and every one of those veins – where they ended – a person sitting at that desk and it was them that all of this scarlet light was flowing into.”

“Gertrude,” Martin says.

Jon nods, then holds up one finger: *Wait.* The Archive has more to say; Jon can practically feel the words bubbling up his throat and crowding behind his teeth. As discomfiting as it is to have it hijack his voice, sometimes it's easier to ride out that compulsion than to tamp it down.

"I have no responsibility to try and prevent whatever fate is coming for you – such a thing is likely impossible – but after what I saw I couldn't live with myself if I didn't at least try – there is something coming for you and I don't know what it is, but it is so much worse than anything I can imagine. At the very least, you should look into appointing a successor."

Statement ends, Jon thinks, working his jaw to soothe the unnatural tension that has taken root there. *Happy now? Anything else to add?*

As expected, it doesn't answer. He's well aware that addressing the Archive essentially amounts to talking to himself, but carrying on an internal dialogue with the more frustrating aspects of himself was a habit long before he took on the mantle of Archivist.

After a few seconds, he feels the Archive's imposing presence start to recede, releasing him from the compulsion. It's still *there*, of course – it's *always* there, looming over him like a vulture, as impossible to ignore as a knife to the throat – but for now it seems content to fall back and observe once more.

Georgie sighs. "That's why you're sympathetic to him."

"He tried." Jon shrugs. "He didn't have to, but he did."

"That still doesn't mean he's going to help this time," Martin says.

"No, but he has no incentive to hurt us, either. There's no harm in asking him questions. He's not going to run to Jonah to inform on us. The worst that happens is he says 'no' and goes back to minding his own business. But if he agrees to talk… well, it might be our best chance to determine how much of what Jonah says is true."

Georgie chews on her thumbnail for a few seconds before looking back up at Jon, a pensive frown on her face. “Why’d he go out of his way to come here at all, if he has no motivation one way or the other?”

“Honestly? Curiosity, I think. But… I suppose I’m also hoping that there’s a part of him that might sympathize.”

“Do you really think there is?” Martin asks.

“I don’t know. In my future, probably not. He wasn’t *enjoying* himself like some of the other Avatars – I mean, he *was* feeding on the fear produced by his domain, but even then, he didn’t strike me as cruel. It was just… acceptance in the face of a conclusion at ultimately stayed the same regardless of the path leading up to it, and…”

And maybe it speaks to Jon’s mental state at the time, but there were a few points in Oliver’s statement that struck him as almost *merciful.* After all, in the face of seemingly endless torment, death was a covetable escape.

“I have no power to stop it,” the Archive recites, *“and even if I did, I would not do so. For to rob a soul of death is as torturous as its inevitable coming – I fear the annihilation you would gift me as little as I desire it – perhaps once it might have horrified me, or given me some sense of pursuing the ultimate release of the world that* you *have damned – I am now, as the thing I feed, a fixed point, that has neither the longing nor ability to change its state of existence – even you, with all your power, cannot keep the world alive forever. All things end, and every step you take, whatever direction you may choose, only brings you closer to it.”*

“That Oliver again?” Martin mutters tetchily. “Doesn’t sound to me like he’ll be particularly inclined to help.”

“Well–” The word comes out as a rasp, and Jon has to pause to clear his throat before continuing. “That was – that was the Oliver of the future. After the change, he was too much of the End not to live its truth, just as I was too much of the Eye not to walk its path and archive its world. We were both conduits, inseparable from the powers that laid claim to us. Here and now, though, I’m hoping he might still be…”

“What, *benevolent?”* Martin says incredulously.

Jon is quiet for a long moment, trying to find the right words to explain.

“At my most hopeless,” he says slowly, “I still *cared,* even though there was no meaningful way for me to put it into practice. I don’t think I ever managed to reach the level of acceptance that Oliver did – and sometimes I envied him for that. But embracing the End as a foregone conclusion doesn’t *necessarily* mean he’s completely unmoved by what happens in the interim. Not yet, anyway. And as of right now, whether it’s out of curiosity or compassion, obviously he still interacts with the world from time to time, even if he prefers to exist in the background for the most part.”

Martin and Georgie both look unconvinced.

“I’m not asking him to help us change fate,” Jon goes on. “In his view, there *is* no obstructing fate – not in any way that genuinely matters to his patron. Oliver isn’t particularly concerned about *when* the End will come – he’s just secure in the knowledge that it will happen eventually, with or without the interference of any mortal actor. Passive or active, nothing he does or doesn’t do will change that. But I’m thinking it’s been a long time since someone has asked him for help that he actually has the power to provide, and… I know what that’s like.”

Despite the immense power that Jon could exercise after the culmination of the Watcher’s Crown, he was ultimately powerless to change things for the better. It’s why he leapt at the chance to help Naomi in her nightmare: even a small, low-effort act of kindness after so long without the opportunity was overwhelmingly liberating.

It was insignificant against the vast backdrop of the universe, perhaps, but it still left a mark. It prompted a cascade of little changes that completely rewrote their dynamic; it curtailed some of the suffering in which Jon had previously been so unwillingly complicit; it's even acted as an inoculation against the loneliness that had permeated both of their lives during this stretch of time when Jon was last here. Those little changes mattered to him, and they mattered to Naomi – not only in that first moment, but in all the time since.

All of that had to count for *something,* right? It took fourteen ill-fated marks to end the world, after all. With any one of them missing, the Ritual wouldn’t have worked and the world at large would never have noticed. But that didn’t make any one of those marks wholly

insignificant on its own. They scarred him and the people around him; every encounter changed him, whittled away at his sense of self, left him progressively vulnerable and set him up for successive marks.

The repercussions still linger. They probably always will.

In his sporadic moments of cautious optimism, Jon cannot help but wonder: If a series of little cruelties can create such a perfect and terrible storm, is it really inconceivable that a pattern of little rebellions could keep it at bay? And Jon has long since come to the conclusion that compassion in the face of unimaginable cruelty is its own form of rebellion.

"As much as Oliver talks about fate and inevitability," Jon says, "he still seems to believe in free will to an extent. That we all make choices. When he last spoke to me, he offered me a choice. Now I'm offering one to him."

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but…" Georgie releases a weary exhale and tosses her head back to stare at the ceiling. "You're *sure* this won't come back to bite you?"

"We have nothing to lose by asking," Jon says. "And he has nothing to lose regardless of what choice he makes, but… it feels right to at least give him the option. Whatever he decides, I won't begrudge him for it."

"Fine," she says tersely. "Do what you want."

Jon just barely suppresses a wince. "Georgie?"

"Sorry, that came off as–" Georgie heaves another sigh. "I'm not angry with you. I get it. It makes sense. I just don't *like* it."

"I know."

“Just… be mindful, alright? You don’t owe him any answers you don’t want to give. And he doesn’t deserve the benefit of the doubt just because you relate to him.”

“I know,” Jon says again.

“I mean it, Jon,” she says sharply. She takes a steadying breath before continuing, more diplomatically this time. “It’s… sweet, I guess, that you want to empathize with him, but you have a tendency to…” Georgie pauses, weighing her words. “I mean, I’ve seen you compare yourself to Helen, too. And Jonah.”

“Well, I don’t think anyone would deny that there are certain… similarities,” Jon says, not quite under his breath.

“Yeah, you’re always going to have *something* in common with other people if you look hard enough. But sometimes you see the worst in people and you fold it into how you see yourself. Like you’re looking into a funhouse mirror, but you can’t see how the reflection is distorted.” Jon avoids meeting her eyes, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. “Look, I know you don’t want to hear it, but you have a history of comparing yourself to your abusers. Sorry,” she adds when he flinches, “but it’s the truth, and you need to hear it. Just… think about it, okay? Ask yourself whether this is compassion or if it’s just another way to dehumanize yourself.”

“I–” Jon swallows around the lump in his throat, his mouth gone dry. “Okay, I – I get your point, but – I swear that’s not what this is. With Helen, and – and – and Jonah, it’s – they’ve actually gone out of their way to – to manipulate, to cause real harm. Oliver is different.”

“You were marked by the End,” Georgie says pointedly.

“Yes, but that wasn’t Oliver’s fault. He didn’t hurt me, never tried to trap me or trick me – never pressured me into making one choice over another, even at the end of the world. I really don’t think he’s evil, or sadistic, or – or scheming, weaving some grand web. He’s just watching things unfold, because he had a crash course in the stages of grief forced onto him and the end result was… well, acceptance. He doesn’t fear the End, but he doesn’t worship it, either. He just embodies it, openly and authentically.”

Georgie is silent for nearly a full minute, scrutinizing Jon intently, before she capitulates.

“Alright. I’ll… trust your judgment, I guess,” she says, but she shares a knowing glance with Martin – who looks just as leery as she does – when she says it. “Still, be careful.”

“I, uh… I imagine you don’t want to be here when I talk to him?” Jon ventures, though he’s certain he already knows the answer.

“No,” Georgie says summarily.

Jon releases a breathless chuckle. “Fair enough.”

“I really should be getting home to Melanie, anyway. It’s stay-home date night. Pizza and a movie.” Georgie offers a tentative grin, her shoulders relaxing minutely. “She hasn’t seen the new *Ghostbusters* yet, somehow – something about having been preoccupied with *real* paranormal bullshit for the last few years – but I checked and the DVD version has audio description, so I bought a copy. She’d be cross with me if I stood her up for the grim reaper.”

“I imagine so.” Jon tilts his head. “Although, Oliver isn’t *actually* the–”

“Jon,” Georgie sighs, “I was being *facetious*.”

When the three of them leave the tunnels, they find Oliver still waiting awkwardly at the bottom of the stairs out of the Archives, Basira standing sentinel nearby. Daisy leans against a far wall, eyeing him from a distance.

Georgie gives a long, doubtful look at Oliver before turning to Jon and offering a hug that he gladly accepts.

“Text me later tonight?” Georgie says. “And keep me updated on your travel plans.”

“Will do. Tell Melanie I said hello. And tell the Admiral he’s a national treasure.”

Georgie snorts at that, shaking her head in amusement before turning towards the stairs. Oliver nearly jumps out of the way as she strides in his direction, but she doesn’t stop to confront him beyond a glare as she passes. A prolonged, awkward minute of silence passes after she leaves, charged with suspicion and tension.

“Tunnels,” Basira says eventually, her tone and expression giving nothing away. She doesn’t wait for a response before stalking off down the hall, Daisy falling in line behind her.

Basira barely waits for the others to take their seats before she launches into her interrogation. Although her eyes remain fixed on Oliver, her first question isn’t directed at him.

“Why is he here, Jon?”

“Like I said, I invited him.” Jon glances at Oliver, apologetic. It feels odd to talk about him as if he isn’t present.

“Why?”

“Mutual curiosity, I expect,” Oliver cuts in, inclining his head towards Jon. “You have questions for me.”

Jon returns a nod. He has ulterior motives, and Oliver knows it. To pretend otherwise would be pointless, not to mention insulting.

“Oliver is an Avatar of the End,” Jon tells the others. “There might be a chance he could tell us how much of what Elias says is true.”

“And what’s the price tag?” Basira asks.

“He has questions of his own. He could tell in the hospital that there’s something… *wrong* about me. Obviously, I couldn’t talk about it where Elias could hear.”

“You shouldn’t disclose it at all,” Basira says. “If any of it gets back to him–”

“Oliver has no reason to betray our confidence.” Jon’s gaze flicks to Oliver. “Right?”

“Consider me a neutral party,” Oliver replies.

“You’re going to just… take him at his word,” Basira scoffs.

“The End has no Ritual,” Jon says, “and it has no reason to prevent any of the other Entities from successfully pulling off their own Rituals. No matter what happens to this world, the End will claim everything eventually. The *when* and *how* are irrelevant to it. In the meantime, the world as-is suits it just fine. It has no desire to postpone or hasten the end of all things.”

“Terminus is what it is,” Oliver agrees. “I have neither the power nor the desire to contradict it.”

“Then why would you help us?” Basira asks.

“I never said that I would.”

“I’m not asking you to actively intervene,” Jon says before Basira can offer a retort. “I just want to talk. That… *is* why you came here, isn’t it?”

Oliver hesitates for a moment before answering. “Your curiosity must have rubbed off on me.”

Unbidden, Oliver’s statement rushes to the forefront of Jon’s mind: *I still remember the first time I tried to touch one…. I don’t know why I did it; I knew it was a stupid thing to do. But I just… maybe I wanted it this way.*

“Don’t know about that,” Jon says quietly. “Curiosity is only human.”

And the worst part was that, somewhere in me, I – I liked it, the statement plays on. *Underneath all that awful fear, it felt like… home.*

“Perhaps,” Oliver says, noncommittal.

“So you’ll tell us what we want to know,” Daisy finally speaks up. Despite her veneer of calm – leaning back in her chair, arms crossed – her bouncing leg belies her agitation.

“It makes no difference to me.” Oliver shrugs. “Though I can’t promise my answers will be satisfying.”

“I still don’t like this,” Basira says, glaring askance at Oliver.

“Look,” Jon says, “this is the only way I can think of to figure out what stakes we’re working with. Jonah has been cheating death for centuries–”

“Jon!” Basira hisses.

“It’s important context,” Jon argues back. “Anyway, it’s going to come up when I tell him my story. It’s not exactly a detail I can gloss over; it’s central to the plot.” He sighs and looks at Oliver. “Elias is Jonah Magnus, the original founder of the Institute.”

Basira throws her hands up with a frustrated snarl. She turns to Daisy for support, but Daisy only offers a sympathetic grimace and a half-shrug.

“I thought there was something odd about him,” Oliver says blandly. “He’s *long* past his expiration date.”

Daisy snorts at that. Judging from the bemused, almost startled expression on Oliver’s face, he hadn’t expected to garner anything other than aggression from her.

“Whenever one of his vessels is… compromised,” Jon elaborates, “or nearing the end of its usefulness, he takes a new one.”

Recovering from his fleeting bewilderment, Oliver turns his attention back to Jon. “He wouldn’t be the first.”

“Maxwell Rayner and Simon Fairchild,” Basira says.

Oliver nods. “Among others.”

“Does that… I don’t know – *offend* the End?” Martin asks.

“No,” Oliver says. “They can’t outrun it forever, as so many have discovered firsthand.”

“Like Rayner,” Daisy says.

Once again, Oliver looks thrown off-kilter by Daisy's diminishing hostility, but he does offer a wary nod in response to her contribution to the conversation. "And in the meantime, their fear of their own mortality ages like a fine wine."

"Is an unnaturally long life somehow *tastier* for the End, then?" Martin asks. "I think most of the statements I've read about it involved somehow cheating death."

"Perhaps. If my patron has a conscious mind, it has never spoken to me directly. Everything I know to be true is just… feeling."

"So it's as cagey as the other Powers, then," Daisy says with a derisive chuckle. "Good to know."

Oliver smooths his hands across his coat, draped across his lap, before glancing at Jon for guidance.

"I gave you a story," he says reticently. "I would like to hear yours. Then I will answer your questions."

"Fair enough," Jon says – and abruptly realizes that he has no idea where to start. "You, uh… you don't need to hear my whole life story, do you?"

"I did give you an outline of mine," Oliver says with just a hint of amusement. "I admit I'm curious as to what led you here, but I imagine if you went into detail, we would be here for hours."

"Much of it doesn't bear repeating, anyway," Jon says. "Just the highlights, then?"

"If you please."

“Right,” Jon mumbles. He takes a deep breath. “Had my first supernatural encounter when I was eight, never got over it, and a combination of lifelong obsession and unchecked curiosity brought me to the Institute. After Gertrude died, Jonah chose me as her replacement because he knew I would be easily molded into the catalyst for his Ritual, and I was.” He looks up. “Is that enough?”

“Which of the Powers marked you first? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“The Web.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah.”

“I thought you seemed… entangled.”

There’s something… off *about you,* Oliver had told him when they last spoke. *The roots, they look… sick. Wrong. And the threads are – tangled.*

It’s possible that Oliver was speaking in metaphor – alluding to the threads of fate, so to speak – but the question has been simmering in the back of Jon’s mind for months…

“When you visited me before,” he blurts out. “You said the Web sent you.”

“Yes,” Oliver says candidly. “Not an explicit command, of course. It was more a… well, a feeling. A tug. The Web usually prefers subtlety, but there are times when it wants its marks to know the hand that moves them.”

“S-so, when you said the threads around me were tangled, was that figurative, or could you… *see* the Web’s influence?”

“The Spider might make its presence known sometimes, but Terminus doesn’t give me the ability to see the shape of its web any more than the Eye does you.”

“Not unless the Web allows itself to be Seen,” Jon says absently.

Despite how much he could See in his future, the Web always remained something of an enigma. It wasn’t until after his standoff with the Eye that he was able to follow the Spider’s threads.

But then, the Eye hadn’t been the only watcher lurking in the Panopticon. The Web had woven itself into the foundation of that place from its conception, and the Spider made no effort to hide. More than once, it stationed itself where he was sure to notice it. The more he thinks on it, the more he suspects that the ensuing ability to See its threads, to *Know* where they converged, was as much an allowance by the Web as it was due to his communion with the Ceaseless Watcher.

“When I spoke of threads, I meant more…” Oliver opens and closes his mouth a few times as he struggles with his phrasing. “Well, I’ve not yet found a perfect description for it. Think of a life and fate as… a jumble of intersections. Some people feel like thread-and-nail art. Others feel like a snarled ball of yarn. *You*,” he adds, looking at Jon appraisingly, “are something of a Gordian knot.”

“What is *that* supposed to mean?” Martin demands, a protective edge in his voice.

“It’s not a compliment or an insult,” Oliver says mildly. “Only an observation. Come to think of it, Gertrude was much the same way. The fates of many hinged on the routes she took. Less of a butterfly effect and more of a hurricane in her own right.”

“So you can see fate?” Basira asks. A genuine question, but the flat skepticism in her tone makes it sound rhetorical.

“To a limited extent,” Oliver says haltingly. “I see the near-future as it relates to death specifically. When people near the ends of their routes, I can make out the details of their–”

“Seeing those awful veins crawling into them, into wounds not yet open, or skulls not yet split – they sneak up and into throats about to choke on blood, or lurch into hearts about to convulse – webbed over the face of a drunk old man stumbling into his car – one snaking along the road, over towards the railing – I’ll never forget seeing a field of cows the week before they were sent to the abattoir…”

Jon trails off with a tired groan, rubbing his eyes furiously.

“You have a good memory,” Oliver says.

“Sorry,” Jon mumbles. “Archivist thing. Can’t always control it.”

“S-so,” Martin redirects, “if any of us were about to die, you would be able to see it, right?”

“Yes. But I don’t make a habit of telling fortunes,” Oliver clarifies before Martin can ask. “Knowing your end is coming does nothing to prevent it. It only ensures that you will live your final days in fear.”

“Wouldn’t your patron *like* that?” Daisy asks.

Basira immediately latches onto that thought. “We have a statement here about a book that tells you how and when you’ll die.”

“Case number 0030912,” Jon cites. “Statement of Masato Murray, regarding his inheritance of an untitled book with supernatural properties. Each time the reader rereads their entry, they’ll find that the recorded date of their future death draws closer and the cause more gruesome.”

“Thanks, spooky Google,” Basira says sardonically. “Who needs an indexing system when we have a walking, talking card catalogue on staff?”

“One of my predecessors in ancient times once filed a complaint with the Eye, aggrieved by all the terrible powers it foisted upon him,” Jon says matter-of-factly, not missing a beat. “Being a benevolent patron, it granted him and all future generations of Archivists a convenience feature as compensation.”

“Smartass,” Basira says, but it sounds almost amiable, and Jon allows himself a tentative smile.

His tolerance for making light of this part of himself tends to be variable. Unpredictable, even. On good days, shared gallows humor is a balm, bringing with it a sense of solidarity and camaraderie; on bad days, even the gentlest dig feels like a barb.

He also tends to be selective about *whose* teasing he can weather. Martin and Georgie are safe more often than not. Daisy can usually get away with it; she’s prompt to let him in on the joke whenever he doesn’t pick up on her sarcasm. Given how blunt Melanie can be, it at least tends to be obvious when her pointed comments are meant in jest or in umbrage; and anyway, he hasn’t yet spoken to her directly since she quit.

Basira, though – she’s always been difficult to read. They have a similar sense of humor, but part of his brain is still living in a time when she saw the worst in him. No matter how many times he tells himself that things are different now, he can’t quite shake that feeling of being on indefinite probation. *Hostile attribution bias,* he recognizes, but having a label for it doesn’t make it any easier to silence those perennial fears. It’s only recently that he’s been able to take such joking from her in stride. Not always, but sometimes.

“Anyway,” Basira says, looking back to Oliver, “I take it that book is affiliated with the End. It feeds on the reader’s fear of knowing the details of their death.”

“Almost everyone has some degree of fear regarding mortality – their own or that of others,” Oliver says. “For some, that primal fear permeates their entire lives. Others only spare it any thought when it closes in on them. Terminus feeds on all of it equally. I suspect that active encounters with it are more about…”

“Flavor?” Basira suggests.

“So to speak,” Oliver says. “Welcome variety in its diet, but not necessary to sate it.”

“Which is why its Avatars have such wildly different methodologies,” Jon says, nodding to himself. “Justin Gough was allowed to survive a near-death experience, but acquired a debt that had to be paid in the lives of others, killing them in their dreams. Tova McHugh was granted the ability to prolong her own life by passing each of her intended deaths onto others, adding their remaining lifespans to her own. Nathaniel Thorpe was cursed with immortality after trying to cheat his way out of death. He was only one of many gamblers who played such games of chance–”

“Jon,” Basira sighs, “you don’t have to go through the whole roster of personified death omens.”

“Sorry.”

“So what kind of Avatar are you?” Basira asks, looking Oliver up and down. “How do *you* feed your patron?”

“For me, Terminus has not been particularly demanding. I don’t know why. Perhaps it’s because I never attempted to cheat my way out of death. It simply… chose me – or I wandered across its path – and it never left. Thus far, it seems content to have me play the observer.” He glances at Jon. “You can probably understand that.”

“The Beholding isn’t satisfied to have its Archivist simply observe. It wants its knowledge actively harvested, recorded, curated.” Jon huffs, not bothering to contain his disgust. *“Processed.”*

The conversation lapses into a tense silence for several seconds before Basira changes tack.

“About Gertrude,” she says. “You tried to warn her about her death.”

“Yes,” Oliver replies.

“Why?”

“The evidence of her death snaked its roots all across London – as far as I could see, and perhaps further. At the time, I’d never seen anything like it. Such a sprawling web of repercussions stemming from a single death – I felt like I had to say something. As I expected, it made no difference in the end.”

Jon worries his lower lip between his teeth. “You said the roots surrounding me seemed sick.”

“You saw roots around Jon?” Martin says urgently, jolting up ramrod-straight in his seat.

“They’re… different from the ones I’ve grown accustomed to,” Oliver says slowly. “There’s no light pulsing within them, no life flowing to or from them. And looking at them, it’s almost like…” He frowns, squinting down at the floor as if it might offer up the words he needs. “It’s like they’re there and *not* there simultaneously. Faded, like an afterimage – one that can only be seen from a certain angle.”

“Okay, and what does that – what does that *mean?”* Martin asks.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you *mean* you don’t know?”

“I was hoping Jon could shed some light on it,” Oliver says, raising his head to meet Jon’s eyes. “I may not have the same drive to *know* that you and yours do, but I find myself returning to the question frequently over the past few months.”

“R-right,” Jon says. “Let me just, uh… where to start…”

Jon rubs at his throat with one hand, the other clenching into a fist where it rests on his knee.

“Jon,” Daisy says, “are you sure about this?”

“Yes, I just, uh–” Jon breathes a nervous laugh. “This never gets any easier.”

“Do you want me to say it?” Martin offers, schooling his tone into something approaching calm. His posture remains rigid, though, hands balled into white-knuckled fists in his lap.

“No, it’s fine.” Jon takes a few deep breaths and then looks Oliver in the eye. “In the future, I ended the world.”

Oliver raises an eyebrow. “I didn’t think the Beholding gave you any precognitive abilities.”

“It, uh – it doesn’t. I didn’t *foresee* the future, I lived it. For… for a long time, actually, so I–” Jon exhales a humorless chuckle. “I probably meet your definition of *past my expiration date.”*

Oliver tilts his head, considering.

“Hard to say,” he settles on. “You’re… a bit of a paradox. Feels as if you exist in multiple states at once, and it’s difficult for me to tell which one is true.”

“Maybe all of them are,” Jon says distractedly. “But, I, uh – I eventually found a way to come back to before the change – or, to send my consciousness back, anyway. But only as far back as the coma. I… I wish it had taken me back further – back to the very beginning, though I” – Jon huffs – “I suppose it’s hard to say what counts as the *beginning*.”

“It depends on how you want to define a beginning,” Oliver says. “In a way, the advent of existence marked the beginning of the end. Everything since then has been just another domino.”

“Well,” Jon begins, but Daisy cuts him off.

“Nope,” she says bluntly. “You go down that semantic rabbit hole and we’ll be here forever.”

“Fine,” Jon says with a petulant sigh. “Anyway, I couldn’t figure out how to wake up on my own, so just like the first time I was here, I had to wait for you to come along and help.”

“I still don’t understand *why*,” Oliver says.

“Neither do I, I’m afraid.”

“Not to encroach on your sphere of influence, but I think in this case, not knowing the answer might bother me even more than it does you.” Oliver releases a quiet sigh. “So you came back to stop yourself from starting the apocalypse.”

“It’s not like he *chose* to end the world,” Martin says, immediately leaping to Jon’s defense once more.

“Apologies,” Oliver says with an earnest nod in Martin’s direction. “I didn’t intend to imply otherwise.” He glances at Jon. “There are many who would seek to bring on the end in the hopes that they will be able to choose what shape it takes. You don’t strike me as the sort.”

“No. But Jonah is.” Jon ducks his head as he speaks, fingers twisting in his jumper. “He wanted – *wants* to rule over a world reshaped in the Beholding’s image. He needed an Archivist with particular qualities to serve as the linchpin of his Ritual. So he created one. By

the time he showed his hand, it was too late. I was the key, and Jonah didn't need my consent in order to open the door."

"I imagine it didn't go as he planned," Oliver says.

"No," Jon says with a grim laugh. "No, it didn't. He suffered as much as anyone else did in that reality. It all started because he was afraid of his own mortality, and yet – in the end, he met a fate worse than death."

"Whatever it was, he deserved it," Martin mutters.

"Maybe so," Jon says. "But it was never about deserving. There was some poetic justice there, seeing him brought down by his own hubris, but… at the end of the day, he got the same treatment as anyone else. Just – pointless suffering, utterly divorced from the concept of consequences. Had a way of… diluting the schadenfreude, honestly."

Martin's spark of vindication appears to fizzle out as Jon speaks, his shoulders slumping and his eyes softening.

"Regardless," Jon continues, "Jonah wanted to be a god, but at his core, he was no different from any other human. Fodder for the Fears. And the one he feared the most – it was in no hurry to finish the meal. I imagine by the time Terminus finally came for him in earnest, he would have welcomed it."

"Those who seek immortality always come to see it as a curse in time," Oliver says sagely. "When they come to terms with the fact that there *is* no such thing as a truly immortal existence, it comes as a relief."

"I walked through your domain once," Jon says after a pause. "You gave me a statement about the End's place in that world. The domains were reluctant to let their victims die – they'd bring them to the brink, then revive them and repeat the process – but the Fears are greedy. Eventually, they would suck their victims dry–"

"– bones – every one of them – picked clean and cracked open – desperately gnawing – trying to reach whatever scant marrow might have remained inside – sucked from them to leave nothing but dry, white fragments – the hunger he saw in their eyes–"

Jon bites down on his tongue. *That's quite enough of that.*

"You alright?" Martin says, leaning over and putting a hand on Jon's knee.

"Sorry," Jon says gruffly. "That one was…"

"Grisly?" Daisy says.

"Yeah," Jon huffs. "But – not necessarily inapt? That reality was a closed economy. No new people were being born. The ones who already existed were destined to die, no matter how unwilling the other Fears were to grant that release."

"As has always been the order of things," Oliver says.

"You predicted that eventually the Fears would start poaching victims from one another's domains – and they did. There were…" Jon grimaces. "There were a lot of territorial disputes, towards the end there. Domains encroaching on one another, monsters fighting over scraps. The Eye got its fill Watching it all play out, of course, but given enough time, it would have starved, same as all the rest."

"And once the world was rendered barren," Oliver says, understanding, "Terminus itself would die."

Jon nods. "And until that happened, both you and your patron were content to let things play out."

"Terminus is patient."

Too patient, Jon thought at the time.

"I don't think it was your intention," he says, "but your statement did come as a relief. I already expected as much – that eventually it would all end – but having it corroborated by an authority on the matter was… very welcome."

"People may fear death," Oliver says, "but anyone who outruns it long enough finds that there is a much deeper fear hiding underneath – that of having the release of death withheld from them."

"We have a lot of statements to that tune," Basira says.

"I imagine so."

"So," Daisy says brusquely, "is that enough of a story for you?"

"I suppose," Oliver says. "Although it raises more questions than it grants answers."

"Our turn for questions, then?" Basira asks. She doesn't wait for an answer. "The… veins, or… roots you saw around Gertrude. You're saying they didn't just foretell her death, but showed how it would impact everything else. So, what about the ones you saw around Jon?"

"It's difficult to observe them for any length of time, but they do seem… more sprawling." Oliver studies Jon for a moment, considering. "Like you are the heart of a watershed moment destined to happen."

"So that's it, then," Jon says dully. "I'm still the spark for it all."

Pandora's box with a 'use by' date, he thinks to himself, somewhat hysterically.

He already knew it to be true, but that doesn't make the confirmation any less harrowing. Everything hinges on his ability to keep his head above water, but the fate of the world weighs ever more heavily on his shoulders, pressing down, down, *down*–

"Does that mean…" Jon hugs his middle, slowly curling in on himself. "Does that mean it's going to happen again?"

"I cannot say." If Jon's not mistaken, Oliver sounds… almost sympathetic. "This is unprecedented. I can only theorize. It's possible that you're like Gertrude, and what I see is a premonition. Or maybe the reality you came from still exists, parallel to this one, and it still clings to you. Perhaps it's a Schrödinger's cat, and it both does and does not exist, right up until the point where you do or do not bring it into being. Or maybe it doesn't exist, and the roots I see are only… imprints, so to speak. Echoes of a time and place that *this* world will never overlap."

"Like trace fossils," Jon murmurs. "Ghosts."

"If you like."

"Could you – could you follow them?" Jon can feel his pulse quicken, his heart thrumming in his throat. "See where they originate?"

"They originate from *you.*"

"O-oh." Jon's gaze darts uncertainly around the area before fixing on Oliver again. "Then, uh – can you see where they *end?"*

"You have a suspicion," Basira says, watching Jon carefully.

Jon swallows around the breath caught in his throat. “What if they go back to Hill Top Road?”

“As far as I can tell, they reach out in all directions,” Oliver says. “There may not be a single end point. Regardless, I have no desire to visit Hill Top Road.”

“Oh,” Jon says despondently. It’s not like he *expected* Oliver to go out of his way to help, but…

“Would it really tell you anything of value anyway?” Martin asks.

“I don’t know,” Jon says, running a hand through his hair, one finger getting caught in a knot and pulling hard at his scalp. “But – but it feels like something I should at least *check–”*

“To what end?” Daisy asks. Jon looks at her blankly. “No offense, Sims, but the most likely outcome is you get no real answers, you lose yourself obsessing over theories, each more catastrophic than the last, and you spend the next few weeks compulsively checking yourself for spiders. Some things aren’t worth chasing after.”

“I just – I feel like I should *know* one way or the other–”

“Is that you or the Eye talking?” Martin asks.

“What’s the difference?” Jon says flatly. He immediately regrets it when he glimpses the expression on Martin’s face – a very familiar mixture of concern and frustration. “I’m sorry. Just… I don’t know. I don’t *Know.”*

Jon tugs on his hair once more, focusing on the dull ache it produces. He’s *always* had trouble letting things go. Letting questions go unanswered; letting mysteries go unsolved. The Beholding just nurtured that obsessiveness, encouraged that impulse to proliferate in his head like a weed and choke out his inhibitions.

“You’re here now,” Martin says firmly. “You can’t go back, so you may as well go forward.”

“Yeah,” Jon says, guilt heavy and searing in his chest.

“Like I said,” Oliver says, rubbing the back of his neck, “my knowledge of the future is narrow. I can’t tell you anything about parallel universes, or branching timelines, or the ability to alter history. The only certainty is that anything that begins will have an end, one way or another. All the rest is just… details.”

Martin folds his arms across his chest, examining Oliver with narrowed eyes. “You say that like the details are irrelevant.”

“I wonder about that,” Oliver says softly.

“Well, I think our experiences matter,” Martin says. “The fact that we were here at all, it’s… it’s not nothing.”

“Even those who make the greatest impact are forgotten in time.”

“So what? It will always have happened, even if no one is alive to remember it. And – and you never know when something little will have an impact on someone, which contributes to *them* doing something that makes a *greater* impact – that changes history.”

“Even time itself will end eventually. History will be forgotten, and nothing will remain to register its loss.”

“And?” Martin persists. “We won’t be around to see it. In the meantime, we’re here. We’re alive. If we’re going to end no matter what, why not make it worthwhile? Sure, there are no equivalent powers of hope and love to counter the Fears, but – but who cares? That just means that *we* have to make up for that absence.” Jon smiles to himself as Martin builds

momentum – shoulders pushed back, chest thrust out, head held higher, speech growing more impassioned as he argues his point. “If a few mistakes and some asshole with a god complex can end the world, who’s to say a few deliberate kindnesses can’t *save* it?”

“Am I the asshole with the god complex?” Jon says drily. Judging from Martin’s disapproving scowl, he is *not* in the mood for self-deprecating humor. “Sorry, sorry. But, uh – in all seriousness, I think it was more than a *few* mistakes on my part–”

“You know what I meant, Jon,” Martin snaps. “And – and *fine*, maybe a few kindnesses can’t save the whole world, but – but they can save *someone’s* world. They can save a person. Doesn’t that mean something?”

“Yes,” Jon says with a small smile. “Yes, it does.”

“R-right.” Martin blinks several times, momentarily stunned by the lack of resistance. “It doesn’t change the world – except for how it does. Just – the universe might not care, but *we* can, and that’s exactly why we should. It’s… it’s what we owe to each other. That’s what I think, at least.”

Martin goes quiet then, arms still folded with a mixture of self-consciousness and sullen defiance.

“How long have you had that rant queued up?” Daisy teases.

“A while,” Martin says, rubbing his arm sheepishly.

“You’re quite the romantic,” Oliver says. He says it like a compliment, albeit somewhat wistful.

“Yeah, well.” Martin blushes at the praise in spite of himself. *“Someone* has to counter the fatalism around here.”

If you ask Jon, there are many reasons to love Martin Blackwood. This is doubtless one of them.

“Besides,” Martin recovers, apparently on a roll now, “it seems to me there’s as much evidence for fate being changeable as not. Yeah, sure, *eventually* everything dies, but who’s to say that the *details* are set in stone? Like – like that book, the one where the details of a person’s death change every time they read it.”

“But does their fate *actually* change, or is it just the book messing with their heads?” Basira says, tapping her fingers against her lips and looking down at the floor pensively. “If the End has foreknowledge of a person’s death, maybe the last entry a person reads before dying was always their fate, and all the previous accounts were just lies intended to seed fear.”

When Jon opens his mouth to chime in, the Archive seizes the initiative, unceremonious as ever.

"When did it change?” comes the cadence of Masato Murray. *“Was it when I turned back to read it again? Or perhaps when I had made the decision to never visit Lancashire? If the book knew the future, then how much did it know me? My decisions and choices were my own, so was it responding to them or simply to the fact that I opened the book again? Perhaps it changed every time I opened it, even if I didn’t read the page, every interaction changing my fate…. When I close the book I wonder: are those same words still there, squatting and biding their time, or have they already changed into some new unknown terror that I can neither know nor avoid, waiting to spring on me.”*

Jon holds his breath in anticipation. After a few seconds of suspense, the pressure recedes, the Archive having spoken its piece.

“Archive’s talkative today,” Basira observes.

“Apparently,” Jon grumbles. “What I originally *meant* to say was that I’ve wondered the same thing – whether the book was really telling the future or simply playing on the fears of the reader.”

“Maybe offering textual support is another convenience feature?” Daisy keeps her tone carefully neutral, gauging his mood.

“The Beholding is known for being *exceedingly* generous,” he retorts.

Basira ignores the banter and speaks directly to Oliver. “Do you know?”

“I’m unfamiliar with the book in question,” he replies. “All the deaths I’ve personally foreseen have come to pass so far. That says nothing about whether or not the End always reveals the truth to all who cross its path.”

“Right.” Basira shakes her head. “Not sure why I expected a straightforward answer.”

“Maybe there isn’t one,” Martin says. For a fraction of a second, Basira tenses. Jon suspects she’s just as repulsed by such a prospect as he is.

“Whatever,” she says curtly. “It isn’t important right now. What I want to know is how to deal with Jonah Magnus. So” – she pins Oliver in place with sharp, unblinking eyes – “what can you tell us about his mortality?”

“In short? He won’t live forever, regardless of how much he wants to deny that reality.”

“Yeah, you’ve *said,*” Daisy says, tossing her head back with an impatient groan. “Him dying *eventually* doesn’t help us *now.”*

“I’m not a mind-reader,” Oliver says. “If there’s more to your question, you’ll need to elaborate. What are you actually asking? How to kill him? For me to tell you whether his death is on the horizon?”

“Jonah claims that he’s the ‘beating heart of the Institute,’” Jon explains. “He says that if he dies, everyone else who works here dies as well. You were able to see the ripples created by Gertrude’s death. I suppose I thought – maybe you could tell us if there’s something similar with Jonah.”

“If his death was imminent, perhaps.” Oliver averts his eyes as he twists a ring around his finger, growing increasingly tense under such concentrated scrutiny. “But as I said before, I don’t make a habit of telling fortunes.”

“So you won’t tell us,” Martin says.

“To be frank, this place is rife with potential.” Oliver casts his gaze around the area, as if seeing something the others cannot. “It would be… difficult to untangle it all.”

“Fine,” Basira says tartly. “Then can you tell us whether it’s possible for him to set up a dead man’s switch in the first place? Seems to me something like that would be the End’s domain, wouldn’t it?”

“It would.”

“Then would he be able to exercise any real power over it?” Basira persists. “There’s nothing inherent to the Eye that suggests its Avatars should be able to bind others’ lives to them. Even the Archivist doesn’t work like that – we’re linked to Jon as far as being unable to quit goes, but we won’t die if he does. I think it’s more likely that Jonah did something extra to bind the Institute to himself.”

“Assuming he’s even telling the truth,” Daisy says.

“So, is there an artefact that could let him do it?” Basira asks, still staring Oliver down. “A ritual? A favor from an affiliate of the End, maybe?”

“Terminus has a variety of ways in which it operates,” Oliver says cagily, “same as all the other Powers. I don’t seek out instances of those manifestations. Given the sheer number of statements collected here, it's likely you’re all more familiar with the breadth of its influence than I am.”

“You’re very helpful,” Daisy scoffs.

Oliver hunches his shoulders, chastised. It’s an odd sight – Jon wouldn’t have expected him to be particularly affected by such an accusation. Oliver never promised to be helpful, nor does he owe them his cooperation. Before Jon can pursue that thought any further, though, Oliver continues.

“I will say that Terminus is its own master. Those who believe they have tamed it are only fooling themselves. Orchestrating their own misery. The moment in which they finally realize that fact – that they have never had the upper hand, that the entire time they have never strayed from the route to which Terminus binds them…” Oliver chews the inside of his cheek, considering. “The existential terror that moment creates – I wonder sometimes whether it’s a delicacy to my patron.”

“Sounds a lot like the Web,” Basira says. The suggestion must pique his interest, because Oliver sits up straighter and leans forward ever so slightly.

“Except the Web reviles its extinction as much as the other powers, and as much as any mortal mind,” he says – not quite *excited,* but more engaged than before. “Terminus, on the other hand – its eventual oblivion is part and parcel of its existence. It does not fear the conclusion of its story. The Web will never surrender to such a fate. It will always seek an escape route, some way to appoint itself the weaver of its own ends. Its threads can never stray from the confines of the routes dictated by Terminus, but the concept that it may itself be under the guidance of another… such a thing is incompatible with its definition. Still, the shape of the Spider’s web will always mirror the blueprints of a greater architect.”

“And you think the same is true for Jonah,” Jon says.

“I know it is.”

“Okay, but – but Jon changed fate,” Martin protests. “In a million little ways – some we probably don’t even know about – and some big ones, too. So who’s to say that every step of the route is part of the End’s blueprints? What if – hold on.”

Martin stands and moves to Jon’s makeshift desk, rummaging around for a few seconds before coming up with a pen. He snatches one of Melanie’s therapy worksheets from the top of the pile and turns it over to the blank side.

“What if the only things set in stone are – are certain *points* along the route,” he says, scribbling a scattering of dots across the page, “but all that matters is that the route *eventually* intersects with those points?” Martin connects two points with a wavy, sine-like line. “Maybe it doesn’t even matter how convoluted” – he draws another line, this time with several loop-de-loops – “or long” – yet another line, this one traveling all the way up to the top of the page and making several winding turns before plunging back down to connect with the next dot – “the path is.” He holds up the finished product for everyone to see. “As long as the dots connect, the rest is free reign.”

“I like to think that choice plays a role,” Oliver says. “That fate is less of a track and more of a guideline. But honestly, there’s no way to know for certain. I only know the end point. The rest is speculation.”

“It’s also possible that the rift brought me to an alternate reality,” Jon says, eyes downcast. “If the reality of my original timeline still exists, I haven’t changed fate at all. I’ve just jumped to a different track.”

“Okay, and if that’s the case, and this *is* a different dimension,” Martin says heatedly, “then that means it has its own timeline and its own future, and whatever happened in *your* future has no bearing on *ours*.” Martin glares, daring Jon to argue. He doesn’t. “So it’s a moot point. If we can’t know one way or the other whether the future is already written, then let’s just act as if it isn’t. Prepare for the worst and hope for the best. At least then it will *feel* meaningful.”

“The worst isn’t something you can prepare for,” Jon says darkly. “Trust me, I know.”

“If I want ominous proverbs, I’ll let you know,” Martin immediately counters – and Jon loves him for it. Daisy chokes on a surprised laugh; Martin ignores her, instead pivoting to face

Oliver. “We want to kill Jonah Magnus. Or at least make it so he can’t perform his Ritual. But preferably kill.”

“Never realized you were so bloodthirsty, Blackwood,” Daisy says approvingly.

“The world will be a better place without him in it,” Martin says without a hint of indecision, not looking away from Oliver. “Jonah’s original body is in the center of the Panopticon. Except his eyes, because *apparently* transplanting them into innocent people is how he cheats death, because of *course* it is, why *wouldn’t* it be some messed up–”

“Martin,” Basira sighs.

“Okay, *fine,* moving on,” Martin sasses back. “It makes me wonder, would destroying his original body hurt him, or do we need to destroy his original eyes as well, or would destroying *just* his eyes be enough? And – and would it kill him, or just – blind him, disconnect him from the Beholding? Or – or would *that* kill him, because the Beholding is what’s keeping him alive?”

“Your guesses are as good as mine,” Oliver says. “Much of this really does come down to speculation and thought experiment, and it seems you’ve done plenty of that amongst yourselves already. I’m afraid that the only certainty I can offer is the certainty of an ending, and I don’t think that’s as much of a consolation to you as it is to me.”

“No, it’s not,” Martin says.

“But, uh – thank you for your honesty,” Jon jumps in. “For trying.”

“I really do wish I had better answers for you,” Oliver says, not quite meeting his eyes. “The End is… somewhat of an echo chamber at times. When you’re already on the inside looking out, it can be… difficult, to shift perspective.”

“I wouldn’t be able to offer many straightforward answers about my patron, either,” Jon admits.

“Wait,” Martin says. “Could you… could you at least tell us whether you can see anything about *our* deaths?”

Oliver draws in a deep breath and releases it slowly. “In my experience, there’s nothing to be gained from such knowledge.”

“Tell us anyway,” Basira says.

“Why?” Oliver says tiredly, his hands curling into loose fists. “Why do you want to know?”

“Because if you *can* see something, it could help us narrow down possibilities,” Basira replies. “If you see all of us dying in the same way, maybe it means we all die when Magnus does.”

“Or it just means you all die in the same freak accident.”

“Wait, do we?” Martin asks, his voice pitching higher in alarm.

“It was just an example,” Oliver says, scrubbing one hand down his face. “I’m just saying that this kind of knowledge doesn’t tend to give people the answers that they want.” Met with nothing but four determined stares, his shoulders sag in defeat. “Are you all certain you want to know?”

Everyone nods. Oliver equivocates for a full minute, rubbing at his forehead in complete silence. Eventually, he releases a long, low sigh.

“Right now,” he says, “I don’t see death closing in on any one of you.”

"Shit," Martin says on a heavy exhale. "The way you were putting it off, I was sure you were going to predict a massacre."

"Honestly," Daisy mutters. "Bury the lede much?"

Jon ignores them, preoccupied with the implications of Oliver's revelation. If they were planning on killing Jonah tomorrow, it would say nothing about whether they were to succeed, but it would suggest they don't die in the process, which would at least offer some reassurance going in. But Jon has no idea when they'll be able to execute any sort of plan. This only confirms that none of them are likely to die in the next few weeks – and that's assuming that Oliver's premonition is accurate. Up until now, his predictions have come true, but there's a first time for everything.

Judging from the contemplative frown on Basira's face, she's running through the same calculations.

"How far out can you see?" she asks.

"It varies," Oliver says. "Weeks, usually. Sometimes months."

"So what you see could change in a few weeks," Daisy says.

"It could change tomorrow. It could change an hour from now." Oliver looks between the four of them with a faint, melancholy smile. "I did warn you that it wouldn't offer much sense of security. It only makes you want to know more."

"Look where you are," Basira scoffs.

"Point taken," Oliver says with a startled laugh. "But honestly, ask yourself whether it's all that different from Masato Murray and his book. If it's worth living your life around the

question of *when* and *how* – especially when the answer, should you receive one, will never put your mind at ease."

"Just to be clear, ah – was I included in that prophecy? Or do you still see the veins around me?" Jon asks. Oliver raises his eyebrows. "I know, I know – the answer won't satisfy me. Just – humor me?"

"Yes," Oliver sighs, "I can still see them, if I look for them, but as we covered quite exhaustively, they look atypical and *wrong* and I don't know what to make of them." A tinge of indignation breaks through Oliver's mild manner, and then the moment passes. "I don't *think* they indicate an imminent demise, but much about you is an enigma."

"And there's nothing else you can tell us about Jonah Magnus?" Basira asks.

"It isn't a matter of *if* he can be killed, but *how.* Unfortunately, you'll have to figure that part out for yourselves. As for whether or to what extent he could bind his fate to the rest of the Institute… there are any number of strange phenomena and improbable feats in this world. I would never claim to be an authority on the scope of it all." Oliver offers another wistful ghost of a smile. "I'm afraid you might just have to take a leap of faith."

Again, Jon thinks with an inward sigh.

But at least he can say he's had practice.

Chapter End Notes

- Citations for Jon's Archive-speak are as follows: MAG 011; 011; 168; 121; 156; 070. The *"I still remember the first time…"* & *"And the worst part was that…"* Oliver quotes are from MAG 121.

- Yes, "what we owe to each other" is a nod to *The Good Place*.

- So. This… was a beast of a chapter, and the last half of it really kicked my ass, which is why it's taken so long to finally finish it. Still not sure how I feel about it – it's a bit of

a digression, but I'm hoping it still fits in thematically. Either way, next chapter we're moving on to Ny-Ålesund.

- Hopefully it won't take me an entire month this time to write the next chapter, but… we're down to two episodes left, folks. Chances are, next time I update, we'll have heard the series finale. Are you all ready? Because I categorically am NOT. aaaaaaaaa

- (That said, I already have a handful of epilogue standalone fics planned for this AU once the main story is done. Because hurt/comfort and recovery fics are going to be at the top of my hierarchy of needs once Jonny Sims destroys me in two weeks, I s2g.)

- Haven't answered comments on the last chapter yet, but will probably get to it in the next few days. Thanks for reading!

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

Overture

Chapter Summary

The team prepares for Ny-Ålesund; Jon and Basira take a step forward.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings for Chapter 25: internalized victim blaming; discussions of Jon's & Daisy's respective hunger/progressive starvation (& associated addiction & restrictive eating overtones); references to canonical past nonconsensual statement taking; some obsessive-compulsive behaviors (counting/checking); discussions of past dehumanization & the emotional aftermath thereof; swears. (Let me know if I missed anything!)

Shorter chapter this time. It was originally supposed to be the first half of a single chapter, but I decided to split it into two instead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"There's a cargo ship leaving from Tromsø and docking in Ny-Ålesund the second week in May," Basira says, tapping her finger against the map spread across the table. "The other option is a flight to Longyearbyen. We can catch a boat to Ny-Ålesund from there, but…"

"Plane is closer quarters," Jon says, looking down at his hands and picking absently at his cuticles. "More difficult to isolate."

"Yeah."

"We paid our way onto a cargo ship last time. We can probably do the same again."

Basira is silent for a minute, mulling over her words. "You mentioned you took a statement last time."

“Yes. A shiphand named Floyd Matharu. He used to work on–” Jon stops himself, gritting his teeth against the impulse to recount the tale.

He never wanted to share it with anyone, he tells himself. *You ripped it out of him.*

Once that old trauma was rooted out and dragged into the light, Floyd relived it nearly every night in his dreams, trapped in the same looping sequence right alongside the captive audience that brought him there. The apocalypse brought an end to that cycle, but it was in no way a reprieve: the nightmare simply migrated into real life, the watching eyes multiplied and intensified – and now there was no escaping into wakefulness.

His story was just one of many in the Archive’s catalogue: a buffet of stolen words divorced from their context, cherry picked, and recycled in another’s voice, layering insult upon injury.

“It’s not my story to tell,” Jon says – less for Basira and more to reinforce it in his own mind. “It was never mine to take in the first place. I’ve exploited him enough already. What he does with the skeletons in his closet is his own prerogative.”

Even if it means they never see the light of day, he adds in silent reproach to the Eye’s typical flurry of protest.

“You Knew he was on that ship before you boarded.”

“Yes.” Jon looks up to see Basira scrutinizing him closely, waiting for him to elaborate. “I mean, I didn’t Know the details. Didn’t Know his name until I saw him. It was more a… a feeling that there was something to be learned there.”

“But you suspected it was a statement.”

“Yes.” Jon forces himself to maintain eye contact. “It was wrong. I won’t make excuses.”

Basira says nothing, but she grants him a nearly imperceptible nod, as if satisfied.

“We’ll be a month too early to run into him again,” Jon says. “His ship won’t be in port until the second week in June.”

“That doesn’t mean there won’t be someone else with a statement on the ship we take this time.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Jon releases a slow exhale. “I’ll… give you a heads up if I sense anything.”

“And if you do?” Basira raises her eyebrows. “Ships don’t exactly leave from there every hour.”

“I’m not going to make us wait for another. I can handle myself. On a ship there should be enough space for me to… self-isolate, if need be.”

“Hm.”

“I know my track record doesn’t inspire much faith.” Jon rounds his shoulders, chin dipping to his chest. “But I… I *am* trying.”

He *hates* how small his voice is. How *childish* it makes him sound.

“I’m not – I’m not asking for pity,” he adds hurriedly. “Or validation, or… *praise* for – for just doing the bare minimum and *not* terrorizing innocent people. I just…” Jon trails off weakly when Basira holds up a hand. “S-sorry.”

“I talked to Daisy,” she says. Jon tilts his head, puzzled. Whatever he was expecting her to say, it wasn’t that. “More of an argument, really.”

Basira's brow furrows as she grapples with her phrasing. Jon waits.

"She's… not well," Basira says slowly. "Getting weaker by the day. But we know what the cure is. What she needs to get better."

Jon nods. He thinks he sees where this is going.

"There's a readily-available treatment for what's killing her," Basira goes on. "All she needs is a hunt. There are plenty of monsters out there."

"That's… true," Jon says haltingly. "But there's the matter of deciding what counts as a monster. It isn't a simple dichotomy."

"I know that," Basira snaps. "But not every monster out there falls into a grey area. Or are you going to defend the thing that killed Sasha? The Circus, after what it did to Tim? Whatever put that bullet in Melanie? What about the thing that first marked Daisy? Or the first thing that marked *you?* You were – what, *eight?* It could still be out there preying on children, and you want to *empathize* with it?"

The comment feels like a physical blow. For a few seconds, Jon finds it difficult to draw a breath. The hurt must show on his face, because as soon as the words leave her mouth, Basira grimaces and presses her fingers to her lips.

"I'm not saying there aren't real monsters in the world," Jon says, fighting to keep the quaver out of his voice. "But historically, Daisy has had an *extremely* broad definition of 'monster,' and an even broader definition of 'prey.' She doesn't trust herself to make those sorts of distinctions, and… I can't say I disagree with her assessment."

Basira closes her eyes. "That's what Daisy said."

“Even if she *could* make those determinations reliably, the Hunt is characterized by the endless chase. If she starts, she doesn’t trust herself to be able to stop. Ethical considerations aside, if the Hunt sinks its teeth into her again, it won’t let her escape a second time.”

“So I’m supposed to just… watch her waste away,” Basira says bitterly.

“Maybe there’s some other option, something we haven’t–”

“You *just said* she can’t feed the Hunt without losing herself to it,” Basira interrupts, bristling once more. “You get to pull stories out of her to keep yourself fed, and she has to just… starve to death.” She lets out a brittle, humorless laugh. “Though, to hear *her* tell it, you’re as bad off as she is. Guess there’s some truth to that. Eventually she’ll run out of stories, won’t she? If she doesn’t *die* first. Then it’s just a matter of whether you stay as stubborn as she does about all of this.”

“I…” Jon can feel his face burning as that enduring shame rises to the surface. “I’m more afraid of playing the monster than I am of dying.”

“She said the same.” Basira takes a calming breath. “Which is why we argued. I was… frustrated. That she won’t do what she needs to survive.”

“That I have options she doesn’t.”

“Yeah. And she was angry that I disapprove of you feeding while resenting her for not doing the same.”

Jon says nothing, his chest still tight with guilt.

“Daisy’s always been there, until she wasn’t. Then she came back, but…” Basira pinches the bridge of her nose. “It’s horrible to say, but sometimes it feels like she didn’t. Like she’s here, but not. She’s… she’s less solid. Fragile, almost – which isn’t a word that *fits* her, you know?”

“I know,” Jon says quietly.

“But it’s… hard, doing things without backup,” Basira confesses. “I need a partner. A *reliable* partner. If we’re going to work together, I need to know I can trust you to have my back.”

That gives Jon pause. The last time they traveled to Ny-Ålesund, trust never entered the equation. She never saw him as a partner. A liability, certainly; an asset, occasionally; a volatile tinderbox, first and foremost. She was always watching him out of the corner of her eye, waiting for him to go wrong. And for that, he can’t really blame her.

It’s tempting to just take the overture at face value. To avoid airing old grievances. But experience has taught him that ignoring an open wound only allows it to fester.

“You, uh… you don’t trust me, though,” he says warily. “I’m not – I’m not asking you to. *I* don’t trust me. But I think it’s best if we’re at least honest with each other about that.”

Basira releases a heavy, beleaguered sigh. “This last year, trust has been… hard to come by.”

“I know. Believe me, I know,” Jon says with a grim chuckle. “I’ve been there.”

Granted, his months-long spell of distrust and doubt came more from a place of suspicion and supernaturally-exacerbated paranoia, but he had (what Georgie charitably referred to as) *trust issues* long before he took a job with the Institute.

“I know what it’s like,” he continues. “To feel as if you can only rely on yourself. Like you’re carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders, and anything that goes wrong is because you weren’t fast enough, prepared enough, clever enough – hell, *prescient* enough. And it’s not sustainable. It’s too much responsibility for one person. Too heavy.”

“Yeah, well.” Basira rubs her forehead tiredly. “I haven’t exactly had the luxury to moan about it. There was no one else to pass the baton to. Melanie was imploding, Martin checked out, Tim was dead, you were as good as dead, and Daisy was… gone. And you came back – brought *her* back – and I’m thankful for that, of *course* I am – but…”

“I came back wrong, and Daisy came back broken.”

“Changed,” Basira corrects. “You both came back changed. That’s all.”

It’s not the first time she’s presented such an olive branch. They’ve been increasing in frequency, albeit still tinged with hesitancy; both Jon and Basira have a tendency to fumble in moments of emotional honesty. *Vulnerability*, really.

Still, these offerings of leniency are such a drastic departure from their fraught relationship in Jon’s future, they feel unreal. *Wrong*, almost – and, well, it’s a cliché, but sometimes he really does have to pause to question whether he’s dreaming.

“But you were hoping for someone to help share the burden,” he says, recovering from the awkward pause. “Not more burdens to carry.”

“I’m not worried about you pulling your weight, Jon. You’re packing more power than I am. And you haven’t died yet, despite your best efforts.” Jon snorts at that. “I just need to know…”

“Whether I can keep it together.”

Basira doesn’t deny it, nor does she mince words: “Well, can you?”

Jon wishes he could confidently answer in the affirmative, but…

“Last time,” he says instead, “I didn’t exactly prove myself worthy of the benefit of the doubt. Certainly didn’t deserve it. But I still… I still *wanted* it. For someone to see me and expect… I don’t know. Better. Something salvageable – something *worth* salvaging, something worth a second chance. Something…” Jon breathes out a clipped laugh. “Something human, I suppose. Capable of being more than what I was becoming. Like I said, I didn’t do much to earn that trust. I have no right to complain – and it isn’t an excuse – but… everyone expecting the worst from me – I think it… I think it made it harder to believe I could do better.”

Until Martin reached out. *Talk to him,* he had told the others. *This isn’t you,* Jon read between the lines. *You’re not a lost cause. Not yet.*

“But – but at the same time, it was sort of… I don’t know. A relief, I guess, that sentiment wasn’t clouding everyone’s judgment–”

“–I tried not to take too much comfort in the knowledge that there were people watching my every move–”

“–there was a gravity, there, though, and I don’t know how much longer I can resist its pull–”

“ –if I were unobserved – I would to no deliberate end begin to follow him–”

“–source of comfort, in the sure knowledge of–”

“–being under constant scrutiny and observation–”

“–and given no chance to harm anyone.”

When Jon pauses for a breath, Basira fills in the gaps: “You felt safer being kept on a short leash.”

Jon nods wordlessly, momentarily fuzzy from the Archive’s interruption. But his real answer is more complicated than that.

That harsh scrutiny back then was deserved and, yes, somewhat of a comfort – but he also *hated* it. Hated himself for necessitating it; hated the others for providing it so unequivocally; hated how *permanent* that condemnation was, how there was no hope of rehabilitation or atonement, how *trapped* he was by a stigma he could never erase.

And sometimes, when that resentment swelled and spread beyond the borders of self-hatred, it was directed at Basira.

In retrospect, the double standards and unreasonable demands that characterized their relationship may have gone both ways. Just as Basira saw him and his power as irredeemable but useful, Jon relied on Basira to keep him in line and begged her to use him – while simultaneously begrudging her for it, on some level.

In many ways, they both saw themselves as instruments, hopping from one potentially world-ending danger to the next, intent on throwing themselves at crisis after crisis until either they broke or the world ended. Was it all that surprising that sometimes they treated each other the same way they treated themselves?

It was difficult to see it at the time. After all, Jon had grown used to it: Nikola saw him as a costume to be worn; Jonah saw him as a key to be cut into shape; who knows *what* the Web saw – *sees?* – in him, if anything at all. Compared to all that, being used as an interrogation tactic or a means of intelligence gathering was mild – and it was better than having no purpose at all – but…

"I think… I think we were both guilty of seeing one another as means to an end sometimes," he says quietly.

"Been like that since day one, hasn't it?" Basira says with a rueful glance. "You needed Gertrude's tapes; I needed to keep you from skipping town."

"W-well, yes, but… I trusted you. Sort of. As far as I was capable of trust at the time. I mean, you were the only one I *didn't* suspect was out to kill me."

"That's a pretty low bar."

One corner of Jon's mouth quirks up in a wry smile. "I was… in a weird place, if you recall."

Basira just shakes her head with a small grin of her own.

Encouraged, Jon adds: “I know we can’t exactly *start over,* but…”

“Maybe we can change course?”

Basira’s tone is unreadable, leaving Jon floundering as he tries to parse the intent behind the words. Sarcasm? Skepticism? Genuine suggestion? The latter seems the least likely, until–

“I’m willing to try,” she says. “If you are.”

“I – wait, what?”

“I said I’m–”

Belatedly, her words start to sink in. “I – you are? Really?”

“I don’t make a habit of saying things I don’t mean,” she says gruffly, but she averts her eyes, unusually self-conscious.

“R-right,” Jon says, somewhat breathless. “I, uh – yes. Yes, I – I think – I think I’d like that.”

Basira nods curtly. Then, apparently keen to escape to a less personal topic of conversation: “So, travel logistics aside – how do you plan on approaching Manuela?”

“Carefully.”

That earns Jon a disapproving glare, but he discovers that it doesn't have quite the same bite to it when accompanied by a barely suppressed smirk and the same fondly exasperated sigh that she so commonly uses with Daisy.

At first, the tunnel looks deserted. Martin's anxiety spikes – *Where is Jon?* – until he picks up a low, indistinct murmuring coming from the vicinity of Jon's makeshift desk. As Martin approaches, he's gradually able to make out the words.

"He was sat upon a most dreadful throne – eyes staring out like horror-stricken stars twinkling in the night–"

"–bright, shining, bulging eyes, with pupils so dark it made me feel sick, drinking everything in, watching with a greedy intensity…"

A shiver ripples down Martin's spine. He skirts his way around the desk to find Jon hidden behind a stack of boxes. One box is open, the lid propped neatly against the side. It's nearly halfway filled with cassette tapes – or halfway *empty*, perhaps, because Jon kneels beside it, methodically removing tapes one by one in a uniform rhythm. He holds each in his hands for a few measured seconds with seeming reverence before placing them gently to the side in tidy rows.

"Jon?"

"His eyes, though, they… they weren't human," Jon drones on, still entirely riveted on his task, rote and trancelike. *"I mean, they were, but everything in them that makes us people was gone. The only thing in those eyes was violence. Carnage–"*

"Jon," Martin repeats, louder this time.

"–when all that made him human was suffocated, and the only thing left to move and speak inside him was–"

"–the mystery, the promise of secret knowledge, of seeing something that no one else was privy to. A secret world that gripped my imagination–"

"–a single moment of utter horror – and the strangest thing was that it was wonderful–"

"–a scene I s-s-still see every time I close my eyes–"

Martin can't listen to any more. He steps closer, stoops, and places a hand on Jon's shoulder. Jon scrambles upright with a strangled gasp. Luckily, Martin is prepared for his panicked, flailing recoil, catching him under one arm before he can lose his balance.

"Wh-where?" Jon casts his gaze wildly around the area, pupils eerily dilated. "Wh–"

"It's just me, Jon."

"Martin?" There are still traces of dazed fear in Jon's eyes, as if he can't process – or perhaps does not trust – what he sees.

"Right here," Martin confirms. "You're safe."

Jon sways on his feet, eyes unfocused. Martin guides him to lean closer, and gradually, Jon relaxes against him, one hand balling in Martin's jumper. It's a self-soothing gesture with which Martin has become quite familiar – and endeared – over the past couple months. For a short time they stay like that, Martin stroking up and down Jon's back with one hand, the other wrapped securely around Jon's middle.

Even now, months after the coma, Martin still finds the steady rise-and-fall of Jon's chest soothing. The fact that Jon is breathing at all is a miracle.

He's been slipping into the Archive's recitations more and more this past week: a sign of worsening withdrawal, they've surmised. *Starvation more like,* Martin thinks to himself with a sympathetic pang.

“Jon,” he says delicately, “when was the last time you had a statement?” Predictably, Jon stiffens in Martin’s arms. “You’ve been getting… lost a lot lately.”

“I’m sorry,” Jon mumbles into Martin’s chest.

“I’m not criticizing. I’m just worried.”

“I… I’ve been trying to be more stringent. With my rationing.”

“Jon,” Martin sighs.

“We all know that Daisy is going to run out of suitable horror stories eventually, and we don’t have a plan for when that happens.” Jon finally looks up to meet Martin’s eyes. “The intervals between my last few statements were… too short for comfort.”

“You put them off as long as possible.”

“Yeah,” Jon says dully, turning his face away. Swiftly losing focus again, he begins absently rubbing the fabric of Martin’s jumper between a thumb and forefinger. “It’s… not a great sign.”

“Well… that doesn’t change the fact that you need one.”

“I know.” The admission is nearly inaudible. “I thought it would be best to wait until just before Basira and I leave tomorrow. Hopefully it will hold me over until we make it back.”

Martin instinctively wants to protest, but what good would it do? No matter how fervent his protective streak may be, no matter how desperately he wants Jon to be safe and well cared for, there’s no denying that the situation is exactly as intractable as Jon says. Absent any way to meaningfully shield Jon from the cruelties of the world, Martin is left with simmering anger on his behalf and no satisfying outlet for it all.

But vicarious fury isn't what Jon needs right now, no matter how justified it may be. With practiced patience, Martin swallows back his frustration and changes the subject.

"What were you doing before?" he asks, although he suspects he already knows the answer.

"Inventorying." Jon pushes a flyaway lock of hair behind his ear, staring down at the open box of tapes. "Counting – checking to make sure they're all here, you know."

"I watched you do that this morning."

"And then I was upstairs for a few hours."

"And you think, what, someone snuck down here and stole a tape while you weren't looking?"

"Out of all the outlandish things we deal with on a daily basis, *that* seems improbable to you?" Jon doesn't quite *snap,* but the tension is there. He winces apologetically. "Sorry. It's just – there's so much sensitive information on them, and if – if any one of them makes its way to Jonah…"

"I know," Martin says.

Jon is running a hand through his hair so roughly now that his fingers keep snagging. "And of course they just keep *multiplying* like – like…"

"Rabbits?" Martin suggests. He places a gentling hand on Jon's to keep him from tearing his hair out.

“Cockroaches, more like.” Jon still sounds agitated, but he allows Martin to guide his hand down. “They certainly have the resilience.”

“They are prolific, aren’t they?” Over the months, Jon has managed to pack two boxes to the brim with tapes, with a third in progress. “You have quite a collection by now.”

“Yes, well.” Newly and thoroughly mussed, Jon’s hair has fallen in front of his face once more. He blows it aside with a peevish huff before reaching back up with his free hand to forcefully tuck it back behind his ear. “They apparently feel the need to eavesdrop on *every* conversation we have down here, so.”

“Did you ever figure out what they are?”

“No.” Jon releases his hold on Martin’s jumper and lowers himself to the ground again, returning the tapes to their home with considerably less tenderness than he removed them. “Nothing good, I’m sure. An annoyance and a liability, if we’re lucky.”

“And if we’re not?”

“Something actively malicious.” As if to emphasize the point, Jon slams a tape into the box with a loud *clack*. His subsequent wince – as if the action physically pained him somehow – doesn’t escape Martin’s notice. “And we’re not lucky, so.”

“Hm.” Martin picks up one of the several recorders littering Jon’s desk, examining it. “You know, they never seem to run down their batteries. Assuming they even *have* batteries.”

“Probably full of cobwebs or teeth or – or – or spiders, or something,” Jon mutters. He shakes his head, but it does nothing to detract from the visible shudder that courses through him. Cramming the last of the tapes into the box, he replaces the lid with more force than strictly necessary. “Anyway, all the tapes are here and accounted for. While I’m gone, can you, ah…”

“Yes, I’ll monitor the tape population.” Martin’s wry smile fades when he notices the tremor in Jon’s hands. “You all ready to go, then?”

“Ready as I can be.” Jon takes Martin’s proffered hand and allows himself to be pulled upright with a slightly winded grunt. “Not that it matters. It has to be done, like it or not.”

“I’m sorry you have to do this all over again.”

“It’s not like I’m planning on Seeing the Dark Sun this time,” Jon says with a shrug. “And even if I was–”

“Don’t say it wasn’t that bad,” Martin says sternly. Jon closes his mouth. “Anyway, you… you’re still scared, I know you are. And that – that’s understandable. You don’t have to pretend not to be.”

“It’s not the Dark Sun that worries me.”

“Then what is it?”

Jon is silent for a long moment, frowning down at the floor as he gathers his thoughts.

“The trip between the hospital and here notwithstanding,” he begins slowly, “I haven’t been… you know – *out there* in the world since… I – I mean, the last time I *traveled* anywhere, it was…”

“Oh.”

“It’s – it’s difficult to reconcile the difference is all,” Jon blurts out in a rush of air. “Disorientating. Like it’s all a dream, and – and I can’t fully trust it. Like what I’m seeing is just an illusion, and behind it all is the world as I remember it, and – and the veil could be lifted at any moment, and I’ll get blindsided by the revelation that none of this – none of this

was *real*, and I'm still back *there*, and – and – and this is all just some – some cruel trick, one of the domains giving me a taste of hope before ripping it away and gorging itself on the–"

Martin cups Jon's face in both hands, running his thumbs over Jon's cheekbones in a soothing motion. "Do you feel that?"

Jon cracks a smile. "Yes."

"This is real," Martin says. "I promise."

"I – I know," Jon says, leaning into the touch. Martin can see the way his throat bobs as he struggles to swallow. "It just – it doesn't always feel like it."

"I know."

"But – but that aside, I don't trust myself out there," Jon continues. "Not fully. And I'm worried about you. About Peter."

"I can handle him."

"I know you can." Jon's smile takes on a wistful edge. "That doesn't mean I can't worry."

"I've been doing well."

"I know you have." Martin's heart skips a beat at the unbridled affection in Jon's voice.

"So have you, by the way. You don't give yourself enough credit, you know."

“I don’t face as much temptation down here as I might out there.” Jon takes a steadying breath. “But I’ll be with Basira. She – she’ll be there to keep me grounded.”

Distantly, an alarm bell rings in Martin’s mind. “Do you feel safe with her?”

“I trust her,” Jon says without a hint of uncertainty.

“That’s not what I asked.”

“No, it’s not,” Jon concedes. He chews on his lip as he deliberates. “I… I don’t feel safe anywhere. I don’t think any of us do. But… it is a type of safety, yes. To know that someone’s keeping an eye on me.” He huffs. “Aside from Jonah and the Beholding, I mean.” Another disgruntled noise. “And the Web, possibly. Probably.”

“Jon…”

“We did talk, though. It feels… different than it did the last time. She doesn’t… she hasn’t written me off as a monster yet, I think.” Martin thinks he can detect a rare trace of hope in Jon’s hesitant smile. “Feels like I have a chance to prove her trust in me isn’t misplaced.”

“It’s not,” Martin says firmly. “You’re too hard on yourself.”

Jon’s expression darkens. “You didn’t see what I became before.”

He’s all eyes, Martin’s brain supplies, his blood running cold as he thinks back to the statement Jon recounted just after returning from the Buried. *One of my victims,* Jon had explained in the aftermath. *She came here, gave you her statement. About me. About what I did to her.*

The idea of Jon preying on someone like that… it’s still difficult for Martin to wrap his head around.

“You've been honest about it, though,” Martin says. “I mean, after you came out of the Buried, you told me about-”

“Jess Tyrell.”

“Yeah. You know it was wrong. Obviously you still feel guilty about it. I can't imagine you doing it again. So whatever you used to be like, you… you've changed since then. You don't do that anymore.”

“It doesn’t undo what I did. Even if she doesn’t remember it,” he says before Martin can offer a counterargument. “Even if there’s nothing *for* her to remember, from her perspective. Even if she’s no longer suffering the consequences, even if the version of her that met me no longer exists – which is a big *if,* assuming that the time and place I came from no longer exists in any capacity–”

“Jon,” Martin interrupts, attempting to curtail the impending spiral of *what-ifs*.

“Even if I’m the only one who remembers it,” Jon persists, “it still *happened.* Her suffering – *all* of my victims’ suffering – it was real. I can’t erase it.” A smile crosses his face again, but this one is smaller, shakier, tinged with remorse and somber acceptance. “If our experiences matter even after we’re gone, even if there’s no one to remember it – that goes for the bad as well as the good, I think.”

Martin opens his mouth to argue – but doesn’t Jon have a point? If Jon woke up tomorrow with no memory of how he got his scars, it wouldn’t change the fact that he was hurt in the first place. It certainly wouldn’t make Martin any less furious with the ones who made it happen.

“Okay,” Martin yields. “Okay. I – I get what you’re saying. But you *have* changed, and – I just think you’ve earned some trust by now. Including from yourself.” Met with nothing but sullen silence, Martin sighs. “Jon, you’re – I don’t know if you realize it, but you’re more conscious of causing harm than most people are.”

“I’m also more *capable* of causing harm – *far* more harm than most people are,” Jon says stubbornly.

“You don’t need supernatural powers to hurt someone. People hurt each other all the time, intentionally or otherwise. But you aren’t cruel and you aren’t careless, and – and, god, you” – Martin can’t hold back a stressed laugh – “you put yourself through *hell* because you care so much. If you’re so insistent on weighing the good you put into the world against the bad, you should know – the scales aren’t as unbalanced against you as you seem to think.”

“Martin, I *ended the world.”*

“Jonah ended the world.”

“But it was *my* voice,” Jon says, choked and tremulous, eyes misting over. *“I* spoke the words. *I* opened the door. And – and after, there was… there was a part of me that… I – I never wanted it, I *swear* I didn’t–”

“I know.” It’s heartrending that Jon feels like he needs to clarify that point in the first place. “I know you didn’t. You wouldn’t.”

“I never *wanted* it,” Jon repeats with agonized intensity, “*never.* It was – it was – every terrible thing you could think of, and countless more that you would never imagine – and – and – and I would’ve done anything to take it all back, to – to – to *fix* it – to *end* it all, even – but… but also, I…”

He stalls and tears his gaze away, lips moving wordlessly until Martin offers a gentle prompt: “What is it, Jon?”

“It felt *right,*” Jon confesses miserably, tucking his arms tight to his middle. “Like it was what I was meant for. Like it was what my *entire life* had been leading up to. And maybe… maybe it was.”

“Bullshit,” Martin says severely. “You’re more than that.”

“Regardless, without me, none of it would ever have happened.”

“Without you, Jonah would have just found someone else to use.”

“Maybe.” Jon musters a spiritless shrug. “But maybe not.”

“If it was me – if it was *anyone* else in your position, you would blame Jonah and not his victim.” Martin fixes Jon with a fierce stare. “I *know* you would.”

Jon doesn’t offer a reply to that, but then, Martin didn’t expect one. He hasn’t given up on salvaging Jon’s self-worth, but he knows it will be a long uphill struggle, and their current circumstances aren’t ideal for that kind of healing.

Not yet, Martin thinks in silent promise. *One day. One way or another.*

He wishes he could fix it all with a word, shelter the people he cares about from a universe seemingly hell-bent on throttling the hope and warmth out of its charges. In his more futile, furious moments, he sometimes even wishes he could pay it back in kind.

He can’t, of course; he’s only human. But there’s something he *can* do. Insignificant in the grand scheme of things, far less than Jon deserves, and fleeting in the comfort it brings – but sometimes the smallest gestures speak truth when words can’t suffice.

“I can and *will* fight you on this hill,” Martin says, looking down at a teary-eyed Jon with an encouraging smile. “But why don’t I make us some tea first?”

The soft, lopsided grin that Jon offers in return speaks volumes in its own right. “I’d like that.”

“Come on, then,” Martin says, taking Jon’s hand and tugging him toward the exit.

“But–”

“I can tell you you’re wrong and make tea at the same time, Jon. I’m good at multitasking.” Jon sputters a laugh, much to Martin’s delight, but still he hesitates, his attention drifting back to the stockpile of tapes hidden in their boxes. “I promise the tapes can mind themselves for a bit.”

“I… suppose,” Jon says, but he’s still dragging his feet.

“Come on.” Martin pulls on Jon’s hand again, insistently leading him to the ladder. “If I’m going to talk shit about Elias, I’m going to do it somewhere he can actually hear me.”

The next morning, Jon’s nerves are still in tatters.

With a customary clash of reluctance, resignation, and overwrought eagerness, he takes a statement from Daisy. More and more, her offerings contain creeping elements of the Hunt – an indication that, slowly but surely, her back catalogue is dwindling.

No spider husks just yet, though, Jon thinks to himself grimly.

Within the next hour, the group of four meets in the tunnels to trade uneasy *be safes* and *good lucks* and *come home soons.* Glancing to the side, Jon can see Daisy and Basira standing front-to-front, hands clasped between them, foreheads pressed together, murmuring too softly for him to hear. The sight elicits a sense of longing – wistful memories of a time when he and Martin would have shared a similar easy closeness – and he forces himself to look away. Neither Basira nor Daisy is inclined towards public displays of affection; this rare instance of overt intimacy, brazen and unashamed as it appears, is not for his eyes.

He turns his attention back to Martin, still hovering at an awkward arm's-length distance, rubbing his upper arm with one hand, eyes steadfastly fixed on the tunnel wall.

"So." It comes out as a rasp, and Jon pauses to clear his throat. "This is, ah. This is it, then."

Martin's lips twist in a grimace and he finally looks at Jon, exasperated. "Do you have to make it sound so *final?"*

"Sorry," Jon says with a nervous chuckle. "I, uh." He doesn't know what to do with his hands. Why does he never know what to do with his hands? He alternates between letting them hang limply at his sides and fidgeting with the hem of his jumper. Martin's jumper, technically. "I – we shouldn't be long, I think. I hope. If – if all goes according to plan, it should only take a couple of weeks. Hopefully less, but – well, you know. There's always some sort of complication."

"You're such a pessimist."

"Sorry," Jon says again. His sheepish smile wanes quickly. "You, uh… you think you'll be alright, then? With – with Peter?"

"I'm not Lonely anymore." Martin shrugs.

"That's… sort of what worries me." Jon bounces subtly on the balls of his feet, clenching and unclenching his fists at his sides, nervous energy skittering over him and prickling in his fingertips like static electricity. "If he decides that your connection to the Lonely is unsalvageable–"

"I don't think he'll give up that easily. Besides, he still underestimates me, I can tell. I'm used to it." Martin's half-smile is laced with an odd mixture of self-deprecation and pride. "Spend enough time being overlooked and you learn to use it to your advantage, you know?"

“Anyone who underestimates you is a fool.”

“Says the guy who spent a year lamenting my incompetence.”

“Yes,” Jon says, matter-of-fact, “and I was a fool for it.” Despite the levity, that old guilt remains even now. “I – I do regret it. Sincerely.”

“I was just teasing–”

“Yes, but it bears repeating,” Jon insists. “It’s not an excuse, but it was all projection on my part. Pushing my own insecurities onto you, insisting on your incompetence to distract from my own–”

“I know,” Martin says patiently. “You’ve already explained, you’ve apologized, and you’re forgiven. Water under the bridge. Really,” he adds in response to Jon’s dubious expression. “It was a long time ago. Honestly, I stopped being intimidated by you, like, a month in. Once I started to figure you out. You’re not exactly difficult to read, you know.”

“Yes, yes, alright–”

“And you’ve changed since then.” A pause, followed by a sly smirk. “I mean, sure, you’re still an ass sometimes, but who isn’t?” Jon rolls his eyes, but he doesn’t argue. “Anyway, Peter might be an irredeemable prick, but at least he’s predictable. And gullible. Or – maybe gullible isn’t the right word. Too self-absorbed to get into other people’s heads and predict what *they’ll* do, I guess?”

“But there are a lot of ways to isolate a person, and he’s had a lot of practice.”

“Well, yeah. Obviously. But so long as he needs me in order to get what he wants, I can manage him. Just focus on what you need to do, and come home.”

“You’ll keep in touch?” Jon cringes at his own blatant codependence. “I don’t – I don’t mean to be *clingy,* it’s just–”

Martin raises his eyebrows. “Do you really think you’re the only one of us with separation anxiety?”

“I suppose not,” Jon says with an embarrassed laugh.

“I let you out of my sight and eight times out of ten you have a near-death experience. And the other two times, you forget to eat.”

“Well, that’s not really an issue these days. The Eye is liberal with its reminders.” Instantly, Jon kicks himself for souring the mood. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Martin says. “You haven’t hit your ominous comment quota for the day just yet.”

“You ready to go?” Basira asks. Jon glances over to see that she and Daisy have broken apart, apparently finished with their own farewells. “We should leave soon if we want to catch the next train.”

Jon nods, then looks back to Martin. He takes an abortive step forward, arms raising slightly in an instinctive motion to seek contact – and then halts abruptly. Even now, Jon remains hesitant to initiate when it comes to physical affection, still uncertain of where the boundaries lie – and suddenly, he’s back to not knowing what to do with his hands. He settles for reaching up to tug on his hair with one hand, the other toying with the hem of his jumper.

Martin seems just as much at a loss, standing rigidly with his hands curled into loose fists at his sides. Then he takes one step forward, and just like that, the indecision falls away: he closes the distance between them in a rush and he sweeps Jon into a crushing embrace. Jon doesn’t have to think twice before returning it, melting against him and burying his face in Martin’s chest. He finally finds a place for his hands, snaking his arms under Martin’s and reaching up to gather twin fistfuls of Martin’s jumper just under his shoulderblades.

“Be safe,” Martin whispers ardently into Jon’s ear. “Please come home safe.”

“I will,” Jon swears. “I will.”

Chapter End Notes

Martin, rolling up a statement into a makeshift megaphone and grabbing his fast-track-slowburn-it’s-complicated-relationship-status-boyfriend’s hand: I’m going to go ham on Jimmy Cringelord Magma’s dusty Victorian ass and his many, *many* crimes, but I need to do it where he can hear me loud and clear.
Jon, speaking directly into the tape recorder like he's on eldritch *The Office*: Martin K. Blackwood is a bitch and I like him So Much.

(Don’t worry, Martin knows not to pull out receipts about Future Things where Jonah can hear, but there’s plenty of roast-worthy material for him to work with regardless. For example, in the realm of Mundane Evils: that motherfucker leaves his dirty dishes in the breakroom sink for other people to wash; he’s rude to custodial staff, servers, and cashiers; he always hits Reply All when answering emails, not because he’s oblivious to internet & workplace etiquette but because he *likes* subjecting as many people to his insufferable bullshit as possible; and he’s almost certainly a Tory.)

_____

- Archive-speak citations are as follows: MAG 057/096/140/057/060/052; 157/60; 076; 099/154/152/130.

- So, I know I said last chapter that we’d be getting to Ny-Ålesund this chapter, but like I said above, I decided to break it into two separate chapters for a few reasons:
(1) the next few scenes have been fighting me tooth and nail, it’s been awhile since I’ve updated, and I feel like posting an update will take some of the self-imposed pressure off and free me up to push through the next bit of story;
(2) honestly this just felt like a good place for a chapter break rather than immediately transitioning into the next plot point; and
(3) now that we’ve all been knocked on our collective asses by the fact that *The Magnus Archives* WAS a podcast past tense, I would like to offer some vintage JonMartin hurt/comfort in these trying times.
Expect some Manuela next chapter, though. For real this time.

- I'll probably get to responding to comments from the last chapter sometime over the next few days. As always, I appreciate all the dopamine-fueling serotonin-generating feedback, and thank you for reading! <3

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

Remains To Be Seen

Chapter Summary

Jon and Basira make their way to Ny-Ålesund; Daisy and Martin have a long-overdue conversation.

Chapter Notes

CWs for Chapter 26: panic/anxiety symptoms; brief descriptions of Flesh-domain-typical imagery; discussion of police violence, intimidation tactics, & abuse of authority (re: Daisy's past actions); mentions of canonical character deaths & murder; reference to a canonical instance of a character being outed (re: Jon's coworkers gossiping about him being ace); allusions to childhood emotional neglect; a bit of internalized ableism re: ADHD symptoms; discussions of strict religious indoctrination; a physical altercation, including being restrained with a hold; swears.
(Let me know if I missed anything!)

Also: Making use of a custom work skin again in this chapter to format a text message exchange. It might look weird if you have creator's styles hidden.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The journey to Tromsø is… uneventful, comparatively speaking.

Almost worryingly so, Jon observes at one point.

You're fretting because something hasn't *gone horribly wrong?* Basira asks.

Aren't you?

The tension in Basira's shoulders is answer enough. They're both on tenterhooks, all too aware of the dreadful species of things that lurk in the margins of the world, any number of which could be waiting in the wings for them.

That's not to say there are no complications at all. There's a learning curve to navigating the world blindfolded, but the two of them settle into something of a routine: Basira guiding Jon with a hand on his arm, talking him around obstacles, across gaps, and up and down stairs. An improvised system of nudges and taps develops organically over the course of their travels, starting when Basira realizes that Jon has trouble parsing her words over the noise of a crowd. It becomes their go-to mode of communication with surprising ease.

It's an exercise in trust oddly refreshing in its mundanity.

Jon finds the blindfold comforting, in its own way: surreal, but somehow not as surreal as the evidence of normalcy all around him. Consistent, straightforward geography is disorientating enough after so long traversing a world knitted together by nightmare logic and allegory. Even more bewildering are the *people.* Throngs of them go about their day-to-day routines, each preoccupied with their own affairs, taking for granted their relative anonymity against the vast backdrop of the bustling world around them, secure in the privacy of their own thoughts – and blissfully unaware of the alternative.

This is how it should *be,* he admonishes himself in a weary refrain. People deserve ownership over their own minds, their stories, their secrets. The Archivist in him vehemently disagrees, of course. It's exhausting, how relentlessly Jon has to challenge that instinctual voyeurism.

Prone to sensory overload, he's always hated crowds: the noise, the flurry of movement, the press of bodies, the constant threat of unwanted touches, the lack of freedom to move at his own pace. Becoming the Archivist made the experience infinitely worse. The combination of the blindfold and Daisy's noise-cancelling headphones does little to stem the tide of intrusive knowledge: random scraps of disconcerting trivia, a steady stream of morbid statistics, insights into the deep-seated anxieties of passersby – and, on a few occasions, the whisper of a story to be chronicled. At least the blindfold prevents him from inadvertently locking eyes with anyone.

They try to avoid traveling during peak commuting hours, but not every crowd can be evaded. The first time he wanders into the path of a potential statement giver, Jon nearly causes a pile-up in a congested station, stopping so abruptly in his tracks that the person in the queue behind him crashes headlong into him. Basira manages to catch him before he's knocked off his feet, keeping a firm grasp on his arm when the panicked urge to flee overtakes him and nearly sends him careening blindly in the opposite direction. When a

nearby stranger snipes at him for the nuisance, Jon is surprised at how immediately Basira leaps to his defense.

Back off, she says, the hint of a threat in her tone, before steering Jon out of the crowd and off to the side, where he can lean against the wall and catch his breath. She stands firm between him and the masses, diverting traffic and warding off anyone else who might seek a confrontation, giving him the sorely-needed time to compose himself. He's certain that she'll be cross with him after, but… she isn't.

Tense, certainly. Concerned even. But criticism is bafflingly, mercifully absent.

There are a few more incidents after that, but none quite so dramatic. The instant he senses the Archivist in him stirring, he chokes out a warning to Basira, who turns out to be preternaturally adept at finding (or creating) spaces for him to recoup. With both of them on guard and communicating freely, they manage to avoid being in close quarters with anyone who might have a story to tell.

Tromsø offers a temporary reprieve from all of that. There are people, of course – *it's the busiest fishing port in Norway,* the Eye interposes for the fourth time this hour. Jon takes an aggravated swipe at the empty air beside him, once again momentarily forgetting that there's no pesky swarm of Watchers tagging along for this particular journey. Not visibly, at least.

Still, the open-air piers of a busy fishing port are a far cry from a densely-packed train. There's a cargo ship scheduled to leave for Ny-Ålesund within the next hour, and Basira is further down the docks meeting with its captain to (hopefully) arrange for passage. Apparently Jon has earned some trust over the course of their travels, because she didn't object when he requested to stay back and take a breather.

Although the docks of Tromsø bear little resemblance to the beaches of Bournemouth, the calls of seabirds are familiar enough to be meditative. Nostalgic, albeit in an uneasy, bittersweet way. His childhood was riddled enough with nightmares and alienation that thoughts of the place where he grew up are always laced with remembered horror and punctuated by a nebulous sense of grief for what could have been. If he never caught the Spider's eye; if he never opened the book; if he wasn't quite so demanding and easily bored and difficult to manage; if his eccentric reading habits were just a *bit* less finicky, even…

Left to his own devices, Jon could drown himself in *what-ifs.*

A frigid gust of wind whips his hair about. When he reaches up to smooth it down, he finds it coarse from the brine-saturated breeze. Rubbing his fingertips together and grimacing at the faint gritty residue, Jon pulls Georgie's scarf up over his nose to fend against the nip in the air and he turns his sight to the sky. It's a stark, pallid grey, the kind of overcast that manages to be blinding-bright despite the sun's concealment. The sight stings his eyes, but still he does not blink.

It should be exhilarating to look up and see nothing staring back. Instead, the sight fills him with… well, it's difficult for him to define succinctly. Some peculiar species of dread, mingled with a disquieting, ill-defined sense of longing. Perhaps he's simply becoming adrift in time again: remembering how it felt to look up at a Watching sky and hopelessly wish for a return to the world as it was, to clouds and stars and void. But he can't shake the suspicion that it's at least partly a monstrous yearning for the ruined future from which he came.

He doesn't know what that says about him. Nothing good, probably.

You miss it, a gloating, sinister little voice concurs from one of the murky, thorny corners of Jon's mind. *You don't belong here. You Know where you–*

Jon's phone dings several times, yanking him away from that ill-fated train of thought. Grateful for the interruption, he digs it out of his pocket, instantly brightening when Naomi's name greets him and eagerly opening their text thread.

Naomi

Tue, May 8 4:26 PM
Don't be alarmed if you don't hear from me much over the next week or so. I'm on my way to the North Pole because of reasons and might be out of cell range at times, and I doubt I'll be getting much sleep.

(1) would these reasons happen to be of the spooky variety and (2) how is this your life

(1) Naturally. (2) I ask myself that several times a day, but thus far I have been unable to Know the answer. Regrettably, the Eye is exempt from freedom of information statutes, it refuses to let us unionise, and there's no formal procedure for filing grievances.

so you're telling me the omnipresent eyeball god has a paranormal equivalent to bureaucratic red tape

Yes, and it entails filling my head with static and unsolicited spider facts whenever I have the audacity to demand it give me a useful answer for once.

hope it's at least reimbursing you for travel costs

Oh, I'm going to rack up frivolous expenses wherever possible and submit every single receipt

lmao i thought you hated paperwork

Usually yes, but malicious compliance is a surprisingly fun hobby

Okay, it's Martin's hobby mostly. Though he says he prefers to think of it more as direct action.

Anyway, he has the requisite patience for administrative documentation that I do not, and he's turned exploiting technical loopholes into an art form. I just cheer him on

that's so petty. i love it

guess it's one way to spite the apotheosis of someone's surveillance state fetish

Now why would you make me read those words in that order

lmao sorry

(i'm not wrong though)

ok, genuinely dreading whatever novel-length lecture you're typing rn

I was trying to come up with a rebuttal but I have nothing

✌️✌️✌️

well, good luck at the north pole(?!!!) i guess? try not to get eaten by reindeer

More like the abstract notion of inscrutable darkness given physical form, but your concern is both noted and incredibly touching. I'll endeavour to remain in one piece.

wow. did santa's workshop get a gritty reboot, or has it always been much edgier than claymation children's christmas movies have led me to believe

On the off chance that you were asking sincerely: the modern Santa mythos is indeed

sanitised compared to its folkloric roots, yes.

well when you say it all ominous like that, it just makes me wonder if there's any truth to those legends 🤔

in case it wasn't clear, that was an invitation to tell me more

ok seriously though, i'm assuming we're just having a laugh here but since it's you i feel i still have to ask: you're not actually storming santa's workshop, right?

No. Nothing quite so exciting. I'm just going to a company town in Svalbard to snoop on the Dark's doomsday cult

still not hearing any Dark Santa denialism though 🧐

Tue, May 8 6:10 PM
jooooon give me the forbidden santa lore 🎅 👻 💀

Tue, May 8 9:32 PM
if krampus was and/or is real, legally and morally you have to tell me

Yesterday 12:23 PM
ok either you have no service where you are or you're leaving me on read but just know i expect an answer at some point

i can and will withhold duchess content if necessary

that is both a promise and a threat

Jon is too busy smiling to himself to notice Basira's approach.

"What's – oh, sorry," she says when he starts. "Keep expecting you to just sort of… Know I'm here."

"The Eye doesn't seem inclined to help me out on that front, unfortunately," Jon says with an embarrassed chuckle. "If anything, my being jumpy probably feeds it."

Basira glances down at his phone, then back up at him. "Everything alright?"

“Hm? Oh, yes. Naomi.” Jon’s grin returns. “All her texts from the last couple days just came through at once. She wants to know whether Krampus is real.”

“And what did you tell her?”

“Haven’t replied just yet.”

“Oh.” Basira opens her mouth to say more, then promptly closes it.

A delighted smirk twitches into being at the corner of Jon’s mouth. “Now you want to know as well, don’t you?”

Basira rolls her eyes, but doesn’t deny it. “Later. We have a boat to catch.”

When Jon reaches into his pocket to retrieve his blindfold, Basira shakes her head.

“Best not,” she says. “The captain agreed to take us, but she was leery about the whole thing. I don’t want to give her a reason to reconsider. The less suspicious we seem, the better.”

“Still getting odd stares, then?”

“Getting used to people looking at me like I’m transporting a hostage,” she replies with a tired smile. It fades into a frown as she looks him up and down, taking stock of his shaking hands and the way he leans heavily on his cane. “Alright?”

“A bit sore,” Jon admits, glancing down at his leg. “Probably just been putting weight on it for too long a stretch.”

“We should be able to sit soon. Until then, try not to fall.”

“Or freeze,” Jon says distractedly, glancing warily upwards again.

“Daisy says the cold always gets to her,” Basira says, quietly enough that Jon suspects it wasn’t meant for him. “Seriously, though – you alright? You keep staring at the sky like it’s going to crack open.”

“I’m fine.” Jon shuts his eyes and takes a slow, deep breath. “Just… apprehensive.”

“Sense anything?” Despite her carefully bland tone, the crux of the question is clear.

“Nothing concrete.” *No statement givers,* he does not say – but Basira nods, understanding his meaning. “I’ll let you know if that changes.”

“Come on, then.” She starts off down the dock – at a brisk pace at first, but slowing when she looks back to ensure that Jon is following and observes his stiffer, more deliberate gait.

He grimaces apologetically. Up until Jane Prentiss and her worms, he was inclined towards speed walking as much as Basira is. *Always in a hurry to get nowhere at all,* Georgie used to say, simultaneously lamenting and teasing. *Not everyone is a power walker, Jon,* Martin would gripe from time to time during the apocalypse.

Maybe some of us want to slow down and take in the scenery, he grumbled on one occasion, as they traipsed through a predictably grisly Flesh domain.

The forest of pulsating meat sculptures, you mean? Jon replied primly.

Oh, you’re telling me you don’t *feel the overwhelming urge to stop and take notes on the ecology of flesh spiders?*

Not as much as I want to get to a place where the ground isn't *a spongy skin trampoline.*

Flesh domains always had a tendency to bring out the worst (best?) of their morbid humor, Jon notes upon reflection.

In any case, Jon has always had a tendency to hurry, too impatient to reach his destination to appreciate the journey. Internally, that impulse is still there. On good days, he can almost satisfy that restlessness. Today is not a good day.

Basira stops and waits. It's a practice that has become second nature to her ever since Daisy emerged from the Buried: learning all the unspoken signals and warning signs of a bad pain day, from barely-suppressed winces and cold sweat to waspishness and stifled, winded breaths; gauging all the fickle fluctuations in mobility in real time through careful, constant observation; and discreetly adjusting her own walking pace to accommodate without question or complaint.

"You know, I haven't spent much time on boats," Basira says, apropos of nothing – probably to break the silence as she waits for Jon to catch up. "I'm hoping motion sickness during long car rides isn't correlated with seasickness. Does the Eye have any statistics handy? Seems like it would qualify as terrible knowledge."

"Let's just say you should keep the Dramamine at the ready," Jon says wryly as he reaches her position.

"Wonderful," Basira sighs, and she resumes walking, this time matching Jon's stride.

Martin will be the first to admit that, between the two of them, Jon doesn't have a monopoly on obsessiveness.

Case in point: Jon and Basira have been gone for five days now, and – in between bouts of worrying over their safety and mounting apprehension about Peter's inexplicable, persistent

hiatus – Martin is *still* replaying everything he said and did in the moments leading up to Jon's departure.

Or, more precisely, what he *didn't* say.

Nearly two months have passed since Jon returned from the Buried. It's been nice, it really has, spending time with him. He's changed – *How could he not have?* – but he's still *Jon.* Even more wounded and jaded than he was before – *How much abuse can one person take?* – but it hasn't made him cruel or cold. Harder in some respects, to be sure – namely on himself.

Which is saying something, Martin thinks with a pang. In all the time that Martin has known him, Jon has never been kind to himself. It's always been a struggle to convince him to take care of himself in the most basic of ways, let alone spare a thought for comfort.

But in other respects, Jon has grown softer. More open, more communicative – more *trusting,* somehow, despite this world and the next piling on reason after reason for him to detach and withdraw. Martin thinks about that every time the Lonely starts to whisper in his ear. The fog is still *there*, firmly planted in his mind, choking out his thoughts from time to time like an invasive weed. It won't be easily uprooted. Seeing Jon alive and *trying,* reaching out, grasping at warmth, clinging to humanity with all his trademark stubbornness… it makes Martin want to try, too. It makes him want to hope, to look forward and see – to *fight for* – a future where things are better.

So, yes, Jon has changed. They both have.

I'm not the person you remember, Martin said the first time they spoke after Jon came back. *I'm not the person you fell in love with.*

When Martin chanced a glimpse, he found Jon looking back at him.

Martin has spent the majority of his life walking a tightrope, striking an uneasy balance between competing instincts. The part of him that excels in flying under the radar takes comfort in being inconspicuous. There are people out there who see trust as naivety and

kindness as a weakness to be exploited. The best way to avoid their notice is to avoid being seen at all, and Martin learned early on that to be unremarkable has its own advantages. All too often, to go unnoticed is to survive.

It isn't enough to just *survive,* though, is it? Barely hidden underneath all the abysmal self-esteem and the carefully constructed mask of agreeability, there is a spark of indignation and outrage and *want.* To be seen is fundamentally terrifying; to demand acknowledgment is to welcome exposure. But Martin has always had a rebellious streak, carving out a space for itself amongst all the loneliness and fear and self-deprecation.

Look at me, it seethes. *See me.*

And when Jon *did* look at him, an unmistakably pleased little voice jostled its way to the forefront of Martin's mind to triumphantly declare, *Finally.*

Martin, I fell in love with this version of you, Jon said. *With* every *version of you.*

It was difficult to believe. Martin didn't want to believe it. He was *afraid* to believe it. But he did, and he does, and he feels the same way, and he has for so, *so* long, and that defiant chip on his shoulder never truly let him forget it, even when isolation had him by the throat–

So why can't you say it?

Since that day, it hasn't come up again. Jon is affectionate, far more than Martin would have expected. Sure, Jon has always seemed more natural at expressing his feelings through actions rather than words, but Martin never imagined he would be so… well, *cuddly.* He always struck Martin as averse to touch, keeping people at arm's length both figuratively and literally. He still does, sometimes. But more often than not, Martin gets the impression that Jon would cling like a limpet if given explicit permission. Martin doesn't know whether that's a new development, or whether it's just that he now numbers among Jon's rare exceptions.

Maybe I should ask Georgie, Martin thinks, only partly in jest.

Yet there's still a lingering hesitancy there. Yes, when Martin invites contact, Jon jumps at the opportunity to be close. *Initiating*, though… Jon doesn't quite walk on eggshells per se, but he moves with a gentleness perhaps *too* gentle at times. Excessively tentative – but not *subtle*.

Martin long ago perfected the art of stealing furtive glances at Jon. It's not difficult. Jon is prone to tunnel vision, predisposed to lose himself in his work or a book or his own mind until the rest of the world outside his narrow focus dissolves around him. If he ever noticed Martin's eyes on him, Jon never called attention to it.

Jon's staring doesn't have the same finesse. His gaze is *heavy.* Concentrated, unwavering, penetrating – and Jon is painfully self-conscious about that. Prompt to stammer apologies whenever he's caught watching, quick to avert his eyes. According to him, most people find the Archivist's attention unnerving. Martin supposes it can be at times, but he's long since become acclimated to it. Endeared to it, even. It's grounding, despite how ruthlessly being Seen clashes with the Lonely aspects of Martin's existence.

Maybe that disharmony is precisely *why* it's grounding.

So Jon's eyes stray to Martin whenever he thinks Martin isn't looking, and cautious glimpses stretch into riveted, unconscious watching, and Martin graciously pretends not to notice. This has been the status quo for weeks now: faltering not-quite-touches and longing, not-so-surreptitious gazes, interspersed with understated handholding and a few sporadic sessions of what Martin can only call *cuddling.* All of it has been underscored by three simple words dangling in the scant expanse of empty space between them, waiting for acknowledgment.

Jon is waiting – waiting for *Martin* – and Jon… Jon has never been good at *waiting,* has he? Not like Martin. Jon's directionless fidgeting and bitten-short declarations and absentminded stares betray his buzzing impatience despite his best efforts, but still he's *waiting,* with as much valiant restraint as he can muster.

I love you. It's a truth so obvious that speaking it aloud would hardly qualify as a confession. *I love you,* Martin thinks, and he feels it down to his bones, woven into the very atoms of him.

It's difficult to pinpoint when it began. Early on, Martin only wanted to appear *qualified* to his new supervisor, then to impress him, then to prove him wrong – and then, eventually, to genuinely take care of him. Jon was in need of care, and resistant to receiving it, and that was *familiar,* wasn't it? Maybe some desperate, stubborn part of Martin just wanted to be useful for once. To be seen. To succeed with Jon where he had failed with his mother.

Then Prentiss happened. Martin had been certain that Jon would dismiss Martin's story, reprimand him for his prolonged absence, and snap at him to get back to work. And then… he didn't.

Your safety is my responsibility, Jon said curtly, showing Martin to his new, hopefully temporary lodgings. *I failed you,* Jon's contrite grimace read. *I won't fail you again.* Then he immediately strode off to meet with Elias, leaving Martin loitering idly in Document Storage, speechless and bemused.

Maybe that's where it started: Jon barging unannounced and uninvited into Elias' office with brazen, unapologetic demands for safe haven and fire extinguishers and heightened security. He even went so far as to persistently badger Elias for customizations to the building's sprinkler system. That tenacity may have been partly driven by guilt and obligation, but Martin swore he caught glimpses of something more from time to time. Something deeper and more personal, sympathetic and *kind.*

It started, as so many significant shifts do, with the small things.

Martin retired to Document Storage one night that first week to find extra blankets folded neatly at the end of his cot. *I thought you might be cold,* Jon admitted upon questioning. *It can get chilly in here at night.* The pressing question of exactly how many times Jon must have slept here overnight in order to know that was promptly crowded out by a vivid mental image of Jon wrestling a heavy quilt onto the Tube during the morning commuter rush. The thought brought a smile to Martin's face. He said as much, and Jon immediately fabricated a clumsy excuse to exit the conversation.

On another occasion, Martin opened the break room cabinet to find his favorite tea restocked. He'd been putting off shopping, too anxious to leave the relative safety of the Institute's walls. *I noticed you were running low,* Jon mumbled. *And I was already at the store anyway,* he added almost defensively, eyes narrowing in a stern glare to discourage comment – as if

drawing attention to Jon's random acts of kindness would destroy his curmudgeonly reputation.

Those circumspect displays of consideration were touching in their awkwardness. Jon was gruff and reticent, to be sure, but he *cared,* in his own unpracticed, idiosyncratic way. And one day, when Martin looked at him, he thought, *I'd like to kiss him,* and then: *Oh no. Oh, fuck.*

Jon never seemed to pick up on Martin's feelings back then. But he knows now – not Knows, just *knows,* in the most raw and gut-wrenchingly *human* of ways – and, impossible as still seems, he returns those feelings. Jon said the words in no uncertain terms, left them in Martin's care – and now he's waiting for Martin to make the next move.

So why haven't you? What are you *waiting for?*

"Want some tea?"

Martin jumps at the sound of Daisy's voice.

"Sorry," she snorts. "Didn't mean to scare you."

"I–" Martin clears his throat, recovering. "Tea. Right. Uh, I can get it–"

"Let me. I need to stretch my legs anyway. And I wouldn't want to interrupt your pining."

"Wh-what?" Martin sputters.

"You haven't turned the page in at least twenty minutes," Daisy informs him, nodding at the statement resting on the table in front of him. "Liable to burn yourself on the kettle while you're spacing out, fantasizing about snogging Jon or whatever."

“Wh– I – you – I’m – why would–”

“Don’t know why you’re being so coy about it.” Her blasé shrug is offset by the devious grin on her face. “Not like it’s a secret you’re on kissing terms.”

“We… we haven’t,” Martin blurts out, heat rising in his cheeks. Immediately, he kicks himself. Given what he knows of Daisy, there’s no avoiding an interrogation now.

“You – wait, really?” Daisy raises her eyebrows. “Why not?”

“It just hasn’t – I – it’s really none of your–” Martin huffs, flustered. “I don’t even know if he *does* that.”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

“B-because, he…”

Because Martin has a tendency to fade into the background, and people will say a lot of things when they assume no one else is in earshot.

Do you know if he and Jon ever…

No clue, and not interested! Although… according to Georgie, Jon doesn’t.

Like, at all?

Yeah.

Martin cringes at the memory. He wasn't trying to eavesdrop. He still wishes he hadn't overheard. Jon was always so tight-lipped about his personal life back then. It felt like a violation of his privacy, knowing something that he would in all likelihood have preferred to keep to himself and share only at his own discretion. Martin tried to put it out of his head, to avoid thinking too hard on the specifics of *what* Jon "doesn't" – and, conversely, what he maybe, possibly *does* – but, well…

Martin shakes his head to clear his thoughts before they can meander any further into the realm of imagination. In any case, he certainly isn't about to repeat that piece of gossip to Daisy now.

"I just don't want to assume," he says instead.

Daisy tilts her head, considering. "Well, have you asked him?"

"W-well, no."

"Why not? Sure, some people aren't into kissing, I guess, but I doubt he'd mind you asking. Even if the answer is 'no,' I guarantee he wants to be close in other ways." At Martin's lack of response, Daisy heaves an exaggerated sigh. "He reaches for you every time you're not looking, you know. Always fidgeting with his hands, like he wants to touch but he doesn't know how to ask. He's as bad as you are, pining face and all."

"I do not have a 'pining face,'" Martin says. "If you must know, I was *worrying* just now."

"You definitely have a pining face, and it's different from your worried face. When you're worried, you get all scowly and you chew your lip bloody. You're focused, intense. When you're pining, you get this faraway look to you, like you're not taking anything in. And you touch your fingers to your lips a lot – yeah, like that."

Martin yanks his fingers away from his mouth as if scalded, glowering indignantly at an increasingly smug Daisy. "What are you, a mentalist?"

“I’ve gotten used to reading people – picking up on openings, weak spots, stress signals, you know. Don’t know whether that’s a Hunt thing or a *me* thing. Both, maybe.” She shakes her head. “Anyway, you went from worried to pining about ten minutes ago now. And Jon, he’s even easier to read than you are. He’s so far gone for you, I can tease him mercilessly about it and never get a rise out of him. Even when I *can* get him to bat an eye, he never does that… that flustered denial thing he usually does when you hit a nerve. He just goes all… soft and wistful. Retreats into his own head, gets that smitten little smile – you know the one?”

“Yes.” Martin is blushing furiously now, he’s certain. Daisy flashes him another knowing, unabashedly victorious smirk.

“Point is, our lives are messed up, water is wet, and Jon Sims loves cats and Martin Blackwood, but he’s terrified of crossing some invisible line, so instead he’s just openly pining and it isn’t even fun to tease him about it because he’s too lovestruck to be properly embarrassed about it.” Daisy pauses for a breath. *“So,* if you want to kiss Jon, you should ask him, because I doubt he’s going to make the first move anytime soon, and it’s getting ridiculous watching the two of you tiptoe around the elephant in the room. So what are you waiting for?”

“How is any of this your business, anyway?” Martin snaps.

“Well, seeing as Jon’s my friend–”

That strikes a nerve, and Martin is reacting before he can properly evaluate the feeling.

“Okay, yeah, about that,” he says sharply. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Well, all you wanted to do before was hunt him down and hurt him.” Instantaneously, Daisy’s playful demeanor evaporates. “Even after Elias blackmailed you into working for him, you *still* looked at Jon like he wasn’t human. Not even a monster, either, just – just

something you wanted to tear apart, just because you wanted to see him afraid. And now all of a sudden you're *friends?* I mean, I guess I shouldn't be surprised that Jon's willing to overlook a murder attempt. He… he has so little respect for himself, his standards are so…" Martin captures his lower lip between his teeth and bites down until it aches. "He's so used to being treated badly, the bar is six feet below ground."

"Yeah," Daisy whispers.

"But – but what I can't figure out is what *your* angle is. You wanted to hurt him, you *did* hurt him – he still has a scar from where you *held a knife to his throat.* You would've *killed* him if Basira didn't stop you."

"I–"

"He was so afraid of disappearing without a trace, did you know that?" Martin interjects, his face growing hotter as over a year's worth of pent-up fury boils to the surface.

Martin has read enough statements to know that even *one* of the encounters representative of the Institute's collection is one traumatic experience too many. Even so, it's only a small fraction of the horror stories that have plagued humanity throughout history – that *continue* to unfold in the present day. How many people suffer something horrible and don't live long enough to tell the story? The Archive, chock-full of terror though it may be, is an ongoing study in survivorship bias.

"When Prentiss attacked the Institute," Martin fumes, "Jon was more afraid of *that* – of leaving nothing behind – than he was of *dying.* You were going to bury him where no one would ever find him, and no one would ever know what happened to him, and *now*… now you say you want to be his *friend*, like nothing ever happened? And I'm supposed to just *trust* you?"

For a long minute, the only sound is Martin's rapid, heavy breathing. He doesn't know what he's expecting. Combativeness, maybe. For Daisy to get her hackles up, to defend herself against Martin's implications, to take offense to his accusatory tone. Instead, her entire posture wilts and her shoulders curl inward. It's as if an invisible weight is pressing against her on all sides, crushing her into something small and taut.

“I guess we’re doing this now, then,” she mumbles.

“Guess we are,” Martin says stiffly, one foot tapping frenetically against the floor as his agitation continues creeping ever upward.

Daisy nods and releases a heavy exhale. “This isn’t just about Jon, is it?”

“I…” Martin trails off as he considers the question. “No. I guess it’s not.”

“Well.” Daisy rubs at her upper arms, eyes fixed on the floor. “Go on.”

“When you questioned all of us – when you *interrogated* me, you didn’t – you didn’t actually want to find out the truth. You just wanted to get to Jon, because you assumed he was guilty, and…” Martin huffs. “No, it wasn’t even about guilt, was it? You didn’t care about solving Leitner’s murder, you didn’t care about finding Sasha – she could’ve still been *alive* for all we knew at the time, but you didn’t care whether she was in danger, whether she could be saved. And – and even if we *did* have proof that she was dead, we deserved to know what happened to her. She deserved better than to be a mystery.”

“You’re right.” Daisy’s soft agreement does nothing to temper Martin’s burgeoning wrath.

“She was my friend, you know that? She was my *friend,* and you just – dismissed her, like she wasn’t worth remembering, like her life was some – some trivial detail. I didn’t know whether to be afraid for her or – or – or to *mourn* for her, and all you had to offer was, ‘Jon probably killed her, tell me where he is or else.’ You were a detective, you were supposed to *help,* but all you cared about was getting to Jon, and you – you – you threatened me because you thought that I could tell you where to find him. That you could *use me* to *hurt him.*” Martin breathes a bitter chuckle. “I guess Jon was right not to trust the police to figure out what happened to Gertrude.”

Daisy doesn’t deny it.

“So… yeah.” Martin shrugs as his rant tapers off. “That’s where I am, I guess. I know you’ve changed – haven’t we all – but… every time I see you near Jon, there’s a part of me that panics. Maybe I’m not being fair, but I – I can’t forget. I don’t know how to feel.”

Daisy is quiet for a long minute, fingers digging into her arms now, a pained expression lingering on her face.

“I’ve done… a lot of things I’m not proud of,” she says slowly. “Hurt a lot of people. Most more than they deserved. Many who didn’t deserve it at all. Can’t even make apologies to most of them, let alone make amends. I don’t even know if I *could* make amends. Some things are unforgivable.”

It doesn’t undo what I did, Jon’s voice plays in Martin’s mind. *I can’t erase it.*

“You should know,” Daisy says, “complete lack of self-respect aside, Jon doesn’t… he doesn’t overlook what I did.”

“What?”

“He knows what I am. What I’ve done. He doesn’t pretend I’m something I’m not, he doesn’t lie to me about what I could become, he doesn’t offer me forgiveness that isn’t his to give, but he still… he doesn’t expect the worst from me, either. He expects me to make the right choice, even though I gave him every reason not to trust me.”

“He’s still too forgiving,” Martin mutters.

“That’s another thing. I… I don’t think he does. Forgive me, that is.”

“Have you asked him?”

“No.”

“Because you’re afraid to know the answer?” Maybe that’s uncharitable, but Martin never claimed to be an easily forgiving soul. Most people wouldn’t assume it at first glance, but he’s always had a tendency to nurse a grudge.

Daisy hunches even further, her shoulders drawing in tighter.

“Because if he *did* forgive me, he would tell me,” she says, her throat bobbing as she struggles to swallow. “But he doesn’t. I know he doesn’t, and he’s right not to, and I’m not going to put him in a position where he has to justify himself, or sugarcoat it, or comfort *me* for what *I* did to *him*.”

Martin doesn’t know what to say to that.

“And the same goes for you.” Daisy steals a quick glimpse at Martin before lowering her head again. “I won’t ask you to forgive me. Ever. But I *am* sorry – for how I treated you, for what I did to Jon. I’ll never stop being sorry. That doesn’t make it better, I know. But I want to do better. I’m trying to *be* better. Too little too late, maybe, but I won’t go back to how I was before. I can’t take it all back, but I can at least make sure I don’t hurt anyone else.”

“You sound like Jon.”

“First and second place for guiltiest conscience, us,” Daisy says with a tired chuckle. “And I don’t know which of us is in first.” She sighs. “Look, I know you have no reason to trust me, but I *do* see Jon as a friend. Not just because I’m sorry, or because he saved me, or because I owe him, but because he… well, he sees me as I am, and he sees me for who I want to be, and he doesn’t see those as mutually exclusive, but he also doesn’t deny the contradiction.”

“Wish he could apply the same logic to himself.”

“Yeah. He’s an absolute mess of double standards. Best we can do is call him on it at every opportunity. Maybe eventually he’ll get it through his head.”

“Yeah,” Martin scoffs. *“Maybe.”*

“Anyway,” she says, “I care about him, and he cares about you, so…”

“So you thought you’d appoint yourself his wingman?”

“Maybe a little.” Daisy gives him a hesitant, sheepish grin. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Martin sighs. The resentment is still there, but he does feel a bit lighter after getting it all out in the open. Besides, he's so emotionally drained from his outburst, he can’t quite work up the energy for annoyance right this moment.

“Well, in that case – if you want to kiss him, you should ask. That’s all I’m saying,” Daisy says hurriedly, holding up her palms in a placating gesture when Martin gives her a tired glare. “I’ll drop it now. I meant it when I said I wanted tea.”

Daisy winces as she rises to her feet.

“And I meant it when I said I can get it,” Martin says.

“I’ve got it.”

“Then at least let me come along and–”

“Uh, no.” Daisy gives him a quelling look. “Jon warned me about how you are with tea.”

“What?”

“Says you’re a micromanager.”

“He *what?”* Martin demands.

“Okay, he didn’t say it like *that.* Actually, I think the word he used was *persnickety.*”

“Oh, as if he has room to talk,” Martin mutters. “He’s just miffed that I caught him microwaving tea once and I refuse to let him live it down.”

“What’s wrong with microwaving tea?” Martin recoils, affronted – and then Daisy snorts. “Settle down. I’m just messing with you.” She starts to leave, pausing only briefly to glance over her shoulder. “I won’t be long. Yell if Peter decides to finally show his face.”

“Will do,” Martin groans, reluctantly returning to the statement in front of him. Yet another alleged Extinction sighting, courtesy of Peter, for Martin to dutifully pretend to research.

Stringing Peter along is the best way Martin knows to keep him in check. In that sense, it’s an important job – one only Martin can do. Nonetheless, it’s reminiscent of how it felt to be left behind when the others went to stop the Unknowing. Distracting Elias was *important,* sure, and dangerous in its own way, but it wasn’t exactly on the same level as storming the Circus to stop the apocalypse. Comparatively, Martin felt useless.

Now, with Basira and Jon off on their mission, Martin is beset by a similar sense of futility. There’s certainly enough work to keep him busy, given that Peter delegates most of his job responsibilities to Martin. (Martin is fairly certain that, fraudulent CV or not, he’s more qualified to run the Institute at this point than Peter is.) Performing routine administrative duties can be a boring and demoralizing enough endeavor in the context of a *mundane* underpaid office job; doing so in service to an unfathomable cosmic evil is, to put it mildly, soul-destroying. Perhaps in a literal sense, as far as Martin knows.

That's not to mention the customary gloom that comes with reading account after dreadful account of senseless, indiscriminate suffering.

Martin wishes there was something *practical* he could do, is his point. Patient though he may be, indefinite waiting is less tolerable when what he's waiting for is the other shoe to drop, so to speak. He has no desire to interact with Peter in any capacity, but the longer he remains scarce, the more Martin's trepidation soars.

There's no way Peter has conceded his bet with Jonah, but there's no telling whether he's simply biding his time and observing how events unfold, actively plotting his next moves, or already enacting a revised scheme from the shadows. Regardless, he's a clear and present danger for as long as he's around. He may not be hasty, but he's still a wildcard. Jon told Martin about the last time: how Peter released the NotThem to rampage through the Institute, solely for the sake of causing a distraction. As long as he has *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* in his possession, he–

Oh.

Martin smiles to himself. Maybe there *is* something more he can do.

The warehouse is, unsurprisingly, dark. Even with the door propped open, the daylight filtering through illuminates a radius of only a few yards before it's swallowed by unnatural shadow. As Jon and Basira move further into the cavernous space, the beams of their torches barely penetrate the velvety murk.

"Any idea where she is?" Basira whispers from Jon's left.

"Waiting in ambush, I assume. I can't See much of anything."

“See or *See?”*

“Either. Both.”

“And you’re certain that applies to Elias as well? He won’t be able to See us here?”

“Positive,” Jon says. “The Dark has–”

An enraged bellow sounds out from behind them. Basira’s torch clatters to the concrete floor, its light promptly extinguished as the casing cracks and the batteries come loose. In a flash, Basira is on the ground, locked in a furious scuffle with–

“Manuela Dominguez!” Jon says. Manuela looks up reflexively, surprised to hear her name. It’s all the opening Basira needs to gain the upper hand, grappling Manuela into a prone position on the floor and pinning her in place with a wristlock. Manuela cries out in pain, but her wild thrashing continues unabated.

“Jon,” Basira grunts, increasingly winded as Manuela attempts to break the hold. “A little help?”

“Manuela, listen, we – we’re just here to talk–”

Manuela briefly pauses in her struggling to spit at Jon’s feet. Funny, how some details remain the same. A second later, she’s resisting again, now attempting to twist around and bite at whatever exposed skin she can find.

“Stop.”

The command crackles up Jon’s throat and sparks off the tip of his tongue like a static shock, hundreds of iterations of the word coinciding. The air itself seems to quake with the force of it, and Jon is left shivering in its wake.

So, it seems, is Manuela: her voice shudders out of her when she speaks.

"Who are you?" she hisses. "What do you *want?"*

"To make a deal," Jon says, the words slightly slurred.

"Why would I deal with you?" In the flickering glow of his torchlight, Jon can see the baleful glint in Manuela's eyes. "You're of the Eye, aren't you? What could you possibly want? You've already taken everything – you lot and your *Archivist.* Where is she, anyway?" Manuela makes a show of scanning the room as best she can, pinioned as she is. "Too much of a coward to witness the *wreckage* she's wrought?"

"Gertrude is dead," Basira says.

"Stopping us took everything she had, then." Manuela smirks. "Serves her right."

"You wish," Basira scoffs. "She was murdered. Completely unrelated."

"That's–" Manuela's smug expression vanishes. "Who–?"

"Elias," Jon says. "She was too much of a thorn in his side. Too much of a force to be reckoned with."

"Then why are you *here?"*

"I told you," Jon says. "We want to make a deal. A temporary alliance."

“An *alliance?”* Manuela repeats. What starts as a weak, dismissive laugh dissolves into a wheeze.

“We have a mutual enemy.” Manuela’s eyes narrow in something more like curiosity now. “I take it I’ve piqued your interest. Will you hear us out?”

Manuela deliberates for a protracted moment, torn between rebellion and intrigue. “Let me up.”

“What, so you can throw more punches?” Basira says.

“It’s fine, Basira,” Jon says. Manuela is still seething with defiance. The more powerless she feels, the less open she’ll be to negotiation. Better to make a few concessions and let her feel some control over the situation.

Judging from her furrowed brow, Basira is running through the same calculations. She hesitates a moment longer before sighing, releasing her hold, and standing. Manuela staggers to her feet and backs away several steps, brushing herself off and panting shallowly as she catches her breath.

“Did you come here alone?” she asks, massaging her abused wrist as her suspicious gaze flits back and forth between Basira and Jon. “Just the two of you?”

“Yes,” Jon answers. Basira shakes her head with an impatient *tsk* – which Jon interprets as something like *stop volunteering free information to every Avatar you parley with, Jon.* “Like I said, we’re just here to talk. And to offer you the opportunity for revenge.”

“What revenge? Gertrude is *dead,*” Manuela spits out. “Who else is there? Her replacement?”

“I’m her replacement.”

With that, Manuela lunges in Jon's direction. Basira swiftly moves to intercept her, but Manuela stops in her tracks before Basira can grab her. A tension-filled standoff ensues, the two of them eyeing each other warily. After nearly a full minute, Basira seems satisfied enough that the situation has been defused to take her eyes off Manuela and treat Jon to an exasperated glare.

"Do you have to antagonize *every* single person who wants to kill you?" she scolds.

Jon ignores her grievance in favor of addressing Manuela directly: "You wouldn't have any luck killing me."

Basira dips her head down and plants the heel of her hand on her forehead, grumbling under her breath. It's mostly unintelligible, but Jon thinks he can make out the words *fuck's sake* somewhere in there.

"I could *try,*" Manuela snarls. Her hands ball into tighter fists, trembling with rage at her sides, but she continues to stand her ground.

"You could," Jon says mildly. "And you would fail."

"You'll just *compel* me, you mean."

"I could." He would rather avoid it if possible, but Manuela doesn't need to know that. He can only hope she can't tell just how much he's only pretending at nerve. *"Or,* you can listen to what we have to say. Gertrude is dead, and lashing out at me isn't going to satisfy your thirst for revenge. We can offer up a more satisfying target."

"Unless you have a way for me to unmake the Power your Archivist served." When Jon doesn't deny it, Manuela lets out another harsh, scornful laugh. "You've got to be *joking*."

"Well – arguably, Gertrude didn't *serve* the Eye. She followed her own path." Manuela breathes a derisive huff. "Like her or not, she *did*. Formidable as she was, none of that was

due to the Beholding's favor. That was all her. She never embraced the power it promised – not like most Archivists do. Striking a blow against the Eye wouldn't be an insult to Gertrude's memory. If anything, it would do her proud."

"Killing it with the sales pitch," Basira carps.

"But the head of the Institute *does* serve the Eye," Jon presses on, "and he's the one responsible for appointing Gertrude the Archivist in the first place. Hurt the Eye, and you hurt him."

"I'm not an idiot," Manuela says, bristling. "Your patron may pale in comparison to *my* god, but I'm not arrogant enough to believe that I would stand a chance of vanquishing it."

"We can't vanquish it, no. But we could destroy the Institute that serves it. Same as happened to the Dark's faithful."

"An eye for an eye," Basira adds.

"Well, you've wasted your time coming all this way." Manuela's disparaging chuckle dies in her throat. "I'm the only one here. An abandoned disciple, guarding a lost cause. There's nothing left of our former power."

"The Dark Sun," Basira says.

Manuela tenses. Then her shoulders slump, weighed down by dawning, solemn resignation.

"Of course," she says bitterly. "It isn't enough to decimate our numbers. You need to steal the only remnant of our crusade."

"We're giving you the opportunity to reclaim its purpose," Jon says. "Or would you rather it rot away here, diminishing until it collapses in on itself?"

Manuela is silent for a long minute, a shrewd look in her eye. “Why would you want to betray your god?”

“The Beholding isn’t *my* god,” Jon says. “I’m not a willing convert. I was enlisted in someone else’s crusade without my consent – and you know what that’s like, don’t you?”

Manuela just scowls.

“I Know your story.” Jon’s voice turns sibilant with power as the Archive rears its head. “Indoctrinated into a faith that never spoke to you–”

“–brought up to believe in the light of God, his radiant, illuminating presence–”

“Shut up,” Manuela says in a low growl.

“–deep down they were vicious, spiteful people who used their faith to hurt others, and I fondly imagined them discovering themselves in an afterlife other than the one they had assumed was their destination – I broke with them as soon as I could–”

“Jon,” Basira interrupts. The firm squeeze of her hand on his shoulder is enough to snap him out of his shallow trance. She jerks her head at Manuela, who looks about ready to charge him again. “Maybe not the time?”

“S-sorry,” he gasps. He shakes his head to clear the residual static clouding his thoughts before looking back to Manuela with genuine contrition. “Didn’t mean to do that, I swear. I only meant to say that I – I read the statement you gave to Gertrude. I know that your parents were zealots. They envisioned a perfect world that seemed to you like hell on earth, and you did everything you could to rebel against their arrogance. To spite the god they worshiped. We have some common ground there, you and I.”

Granted, Jon didn’t grow up in a religious household. His grandmother was content to let him explore – and he did.

Even as a child, he had an inclination for research. A topic would catch his attention and he would voraciously seek out as much information as he could. His grandmother didn't take much interest in the *content* of those fixations, but she did encourage them as a general principle. Not with overt praise, necessarily, but by facilitating his endeavors: procuring reading material on the obsession of the month, escorting him to the library every so often and allowing him to max out his card. He suspects now that she was simply grateful for some way to occupy his attention. If his nose was in a book, he was keeping out of trouble.

He never told her how wrong she turned out to be.

In any case, one of his many early "phases," as she liked to call them, was comparative religion. Part of it was simple curiosity. Part of it was a genuine desire to find something to believe: some conception of the afterlife that would resonate with him, some straightforward framework for understanding the world, some sort of *certainty* to assuage his fear of the unknown. His grandmother never seemed to care whether he found what he was looking for. She never really asked.

It was for the best. He never liked admitting defeat. Not back then.

They returned all the books to the library on the day they were due, and Jon brought home a new haul, this one centered around the field of oceanography. The seas were brimming with mystery, but at least there was a very real possibility of turning those unknowns into knowns. New discoveries were being made every day, newer and newer technology being developed to push the boundaries of that knowledge. There were sure *answers,* and they could be grasped, so long as humanity could invent the right tools for the job.

Still, Jon found himself envying people of faith from time to time. Sometimes he wished he had someone to point him in *some* sort of direction, like many other children seemed to have. But hearing of Manuela's upbringing… well, if Jon was forced to choose between extremes, he has to admit that he prefers the complete lack of guidance he received as opposed to strict proselytization. His grandmother may not have shown interest in his opinions, but at least she gave him the freedom to come to his own conclusions. She may not have had reassurances to offer, but at least she didn't foist upon him a worldview that made no place for him in it.

“It’s not the same thing as childhood indoctrination,” he tells Manuela, “but… becoming the Archivist – it was like being drafted into the service of a god that I never would have chosen for myself. Had Elias told me the terms, I never would have signed the contract.”

“I take it he didn’t tell you beforehand that he murdered your predecessor.”

“That I had to find out the hard way, unfortunately.”

“So you’re saying you’re not so much a traitor to your faith as you are a disgruntled employee?”

“My boss is *Elias*. Is that a trick question?” Jon is surprised to hear Manuela give an amused snort. “But yes. I’d like to… tender my resignation, so to speak.”

Manuela scrutinizes him intently, as if trying to solve a riddle. “You would give up your power?”

“I don’t want it,” Jon says truthfully.

If he’s perfectly honest with himself, there was a time that at least some aspects of that power were alluring. There was something intoxicating and liberating about being able to ask a question and not only receive a guaranteed answer, but be certain he wasn’t being presented with an outright lie – especially after spending so many months beholden to unchecked paranoia, distrust, and frantic, futile investigation.

But there was never anything benign or inconsequential about invading a victim’s privacy or compelling someone to surrender a secret, no matter how he tried to justify it to himself. Even if there was, even if it *wasn’t* both reprehensible in principle and harmful in practice, it still wouldn’t be worth the irrevocable costs.

“I want out,” he says, “and if getting out isn’t an option, then I at least want Elias to know what it is to be offered up to a god inimical to every *atom* of his existence. I thought you

might be able to assist with that."

"How?"

"The Institute is a seat of power for the Beholding," Basira says. "If we introduce it to your Dark Sun…"

"A mote in the Eye," Manuela says, intrigued. Her attention swivels back to Jon. "Do you *Know* what would happen?"

"No," he says. "But I imagine it will hurt."

"And then what? What happens after? You let me pack up my relic and walk away?"

"I don't see why not."

"I don't believe you," Manuela says.

"You don't pose an existential threat," Jon says with a shrug. "I have no doubt that the Dark will attempt another Ritual someday, but it won't happen in our lifetimes. We have no qualms letting you walk away after our alliance is finished."

"And the Dark Sun?" Manuela presses.

"I don't know what condition it will be in after exposure to the Eye," Jon admits. "But you're free to do as you wish with it after. We won't stop you."

So she can hurt more people, Jon's battered conscience contributes.

“And if I say no?”

“Then I walk in there right now, Behold it, and destroy it entirely.” It comes out sounding more menacing than Jon had initially intended, but maybe that’s not a bad thing, given the way Manuela freezes up.

“You wouldn’t survive.” Manuela sounds far from certain.

“Maybe. Maybe not. But your Sun certainly wouldn’t.” Jon pauses for a moment to let that sink in. “Do you want to see its potential wasted here and now, or do you want to make all that sacrifice worth something?”

“If you’re so convinced you have the upper hand, what’s stopping you from just *taking* it, then?”

“I’m not its engineer or its keeper. I wouldn’t even Know how to safely transport it. Too many unknown variables.”

“So you need me.”

“Yes. Beneath the Institute, there’s a… a sanctum of the Eye. A place of power, like Ny-Ålesund is for your patron. If you can bring the Dark Sun there, I… well, I’m hoping it will sever the Eye’s connection to that place. Destroy the Institute.”

“How would that work?”

“I’m… not certain,” Jon confesses. “Call it a… a hunch.”

“There’s precedent,” Basira says. “We found a statement that hinted at worshipers of the Dark destroying a temple to the Eye in 4th century Alexandria.”

Manuela’s eyes light up with interest. “How?”

“We don’t know,” Jon says.

“Oh, right. Foolish of me to ask,” Manuela says pertly. “Why would I expect you to *know* things? It’s only the entire *point* of you.”

“I never claimed to be good at my job,” Jon retorts. “Look, maybe I don’t Know *exactly* what will happen, but a focus of the Dark should hurt the Eye in some capacity, I think.”

“You *think,*” Manuela mutters under her breath, just loud enough for him to hear the derision in her tone.

“Whatever happens, it’ll be more satisfying than anything you’ve got going on here,” Basira points out.

Manuela barks out a contemptuous laugh. “You don’t even have the *shadow* of a plan!”

“We… haven’t ironed out the details, no.” Jon rubs the back of his neck, chagrined. “We figured that if you did agree to an alliance, you would want to be part of the actual planning process.”

“And if you don’t cooperate, it’s a moot point,” Basira says.

“Also, I was… I suppose I was hoping you could offer insight,” Jon says. “The Dark is something of a blind spot for me, shockingly.” Manuela shoots him a withering look. “So

even if I had any clue how to wield the Dark Sun, I wouldn't be able to channel its full potential. Not like you could."

"That much is obvious," Manuela sneers, teeth gleaming in the torchlight as her lips stretch in a taut, wolfish grin. "You Beholding types always assume that knowledge is synonymous with *control.* Putting yourselves on the level of Powers greater than any mortal, assuming insight into things you could not *possibly* understand… you fly too close to the sun and then have the *gall* to indulge in outrage when you burn."

We didn't come here for a sermon, Jon almost says, but he bites his tongue.

"But I accept that I am a *supplicant*, not a god," Manuela says, reverence seeping into her tone to supplant the reproach. "It's pure hubris to assume that you could *wield* the Black Sun like a tool. It's a *communion,* and only those with true and dutiful faith could ever hope to win its favor. Approach it with anything less than respect and devotion, and it will devour you."

"If you're done pontificating?" Basira says. She doesn't give Manuela an opening to respond. "We're well aware that we stand no chance of wielding–" Manuela looks up sharply, and Basira hastily corrects herself. "Fine – *communing* with the Dark Sun ourselves. That's why we're looking for an alliance rather than just taking it."

"Do you think you could–" Jon pauses as he searches for a way to phrase his question that won't unleash another tirade. "Would you be able to arrange for the Dark Sun to be brought into the Eye's stronghold? Expose them to one another, let them… I don't know – have it out with each other?"

"I'm capable of bringing it to London, if that's what you're asking," Manuela says matter-of-factly. "But it would be at a disadvantage on the Beholding's home turf. If – *if* – I were willing to test this hypothesis, I would only do so on the condition that I could level the playing field as much as possible. Wait for ideal circumstances, as it were."

"Which would be…?" Basira asks.

“The winter solstice. The Dark Sun will be the strongest on the night of the winter solstice.”

“That’s *months* from now,” Basira protests. “Can’t you just–”

“Ideally, I would insist on a total solar eclipse,” Manuela snaps, “but it will be quite some time before London witnesses another. Not until 2090.”

“Looking ahead, are you?” Basira asks.

“Perhaps.” Manuela pretends at nonchalance with a shrug, but she can’t conceal her profound disappointment as her voice grows measurably more subdued. “As you said, the next opportunity for a Ritual attempt is far off. It gives me ample time to study our failure. To discover what went wrong.”

“To refine your Ritual, you mean.”

“There will always be faithful to take up the mantle,” Manuela says, her chin lifting marginally in defiance as she stares Basira down.

“But you won’t be around to see it.” Basira meets Manuela’s eyes with equal nerve. Jon remains silent, looking from one to the other as they face off against one another.

“No,” Manuela replies evenly. “I’ll have to settle for passing on my findings to those who come after. Leave behind a legacy to guide their steps.”

“In the meantime, the Dark Sun will stagnate,” Jon chimes in. It’s a bluff, of course: he has no idea whether or not it’s true. Judging from the unsettled look on Manuela’s face, neither does she. Jon latches onto that uncertainty, carefully twisting the knife just a little further: “Or, you could let it serve a purpose.”

“Its *purpose* was to usher in a world of true and holy Darkness,” Manuela says acidly. “You’re proposing I give it *scraps.*”

“Like it or not, you can’t give it the apocalypse it was promised,” Jon says.

Manuela’s fingers flex and clench back into fists. Jon suspects she would love nothing more than to wring his neck. She’s a truth-seeker at heart, though. Ambitious, rebellious – idealistic even, albeit in a twisted sort of way, harboring an aspiration that most would rightfully find horrific. Adept at detecting and exploiting the more malleable aspects of material reality where possible, infusing the scientific method with just enough magical thinking to bend natural laws.

However, there are some truths that she cannot deny, and she isn’t the type to ignore a certainty when it’s right in front of her face. And so, despite the unconcealed vitriol in her eyes and the contrariness sitting at the tip of her tongue, she does not deny his assertion.

“But it can still pay tribute to your god,” Jon coaxes, striving to stop short of needling. It’s a razor’s edge he’s always struggled to walk, but Manuela is still right there with him, toeing the line. “It’s better than nothing at all.”

Manuela directs a venomous glower towards the floor as she vacillates between summary dismissal and the temptation of vengeance. Basira side-eyes Jon as the standstill stretches from seconds into minutes, but all Jon can offer her is an awkward shrug. The ball is in Manuela’s court, and it seems she has no qualms leaving them in indefinite suspense as she painstakingly examines all the variables and weighs her options. The best they can do is wait and hope that tangible revenge will prove more enticing than spiteful noncooperation.

Eventually, she lets out a sharp exhale, raises her head, and breaks her silence.

“The winter solstice,” she repeats, her voice teeming with tension and lingering aversion. “Barring an eclipse, I would have to settle for the winter solstice. The longest, darkest night of the year… it’s second best, but it should suffice. Shame about the light pollution, of course,” she adds, wrinkling her nose with disdain, “but the power is in the symbolism.”

“Jon?” Basira prompts.

“Dream logic,” he says, massaging his forehead wearily. “It tracks.”

“Fine,” Basira sighs. She looks back to Manuela. “So does this mean you’ll do it?”

“I’m tired of haunting this place like a ghost.” There’s a sharp, predatory look in Manuela’s eyes now. “The Dark has lost its crusaders. The Watcher should have a taste of loss.”

Just then, a loud, metallic *thunk* interrupts the negotiations, reverberating through the space and drawing everyone’s attention to the warehouse entrance. The light that had been percolating through from outside had been preternaturally dimmed before, but now it’s been snuffed out entirely.

Jon glances anxiously at Basira. “The wind, maybe?”

“There was no wind.” Basira is already drawing her gun. Like a switch has been flipped at the prospect of danger, her voice goes steely with manufactured composure. “Not strong enough to blow the door shut. I propped it open *very* securely.”

“We’re near the water, though,” Jon murmurs. “Strong gusts sometimes blow in off the sea–”

Jon’s mouth snaps shut at Basira’s quelling look. Manuela’s posture is defensive again, eyes darting suspiciously between Jon and Basira in the muted torchlight.

“I thought you said you came here alone,” she says accusingly.

“We – we did,” Jon says. “We–”

“Oh, *Archivist*,” a new voice sings out, oozing with an exultant malice. “Long time no see!”

It’s been ages since Jon last heard that cadence, but it’s horrifyingly, heart-stoppingly familiar even after all this time. It pierces Jon like a knife in the dark. He takes a frantic step back, nearly tripping over his own feet as his panic skyrockets and a tidal wave of adrenaline crashes over him.

“We just want to talk,” croons a different voice, rougher and more ragged-sounding. It’s difficult to gauge the newcomers’ positions through the impermeable gloom, but judging from the sounds of their voices, they’re drawing ever nearer. “Won’t you come out?”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” Jon breathes an incredulous laugh, distraught enough to border on a whimper. *“Now?”*

“Who are they?” Basira asks urgently. Jon is still frozen in place, eyes straining against the darkness. Any answer he could make is bogged down with terror, snagging in his throat and forestalling coherence. *“Jon!”*

Jon swallows hard and finally looks at Basira, his eyes wide with dread.

“Hunters.”

Chapter End Notes

- Both instances of Archive-speak are from MAG 135. A few pieces of dialogue from the beginning of the conversation with Manuela are taken/reworked from MAG 143. The Melanie and Basira gossip is from MAG 106.

- Once again, had way too much fun with the text convo btwn Naomi and Jon. Cannot resist those chatfic shenanigans vibes.

- In other news, Daisy WILL point at Jon and loudly exclaim, “Is anyone gonna volunteer as wingman for this lovesick disaster or do I have to do everything myself?” and not even wait for an answer. (Jon made the mistake of confirming that he doesn’t

mind her lovingly dunking on him about this sort of thing and now she's a menace. Listen, playful ribbing is basically her platonic love language.)

- Sorry for the cliffhanger!! But hey, I think we all knew that there's no way things would go entirely smoothly for Jon and Basira. And now I finally get to add some new character tags.

- I'm very behind on replying to comments. (Tbh, spent most of the last month grappling with this chapter. I was stuck on a scene that REALLY didn't want to cooperate.) I'm gonna try to catch up this weekend, though. <3 As always, thank you for reading!

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

Heist

Chapter Summary

Two standoffs and a heist.

Chapter Notes

CWs for Chapter 27: threats of knife violence (but no actual blood/injury) & other Hunt-related themes; imagery of animal predation (think the kind of circle-of-life footage you'd see in a nature documentary); brief mention of institutional violence in a prison setting (verbatim from an episode of the podcast); mentions of unwanted flirting (basically Daisy joking about Simon Fairchild hitting on Martin); Lonely themes; Peter-typical manipulation; dpdr/dissociation & anxiety symptoms; mentions of surveillance & stalking; mentions of fire and arson.

Let me know if I missed anything!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Throughout the course of human history, the Hunt has claimed more than its fair share of devotees. Some it takes by ambush and violence: it closes its teeth around the necks of its prey, threatening to clamp down; breathes hot against their throats until desperation takes hold and the cornered animal within them bares its own teeth. Some it takes by increments: it stalks its marks at a steady pace like a persistence predator, waiting for that moment when flight turns to fight or surrender. Some prospective prey, proclaiming themselves otherwise, even seek it out: presuming that they have risen above the lowly status of the hunted, they pride themselves on having earned the favor of a god through prowess, might, and cunning.

In all cases, the Hunt never relinquishes its grasp once it captures its mark. Even those who see its attention as a blessing will, should they live long enough within its purview, come to find that they too are caught between the jaws of a much stronger, much faster, much more deadly apex predator. In that way, it's just like all the other Fears: the Watcher's favored are themselves among the Watched; the Weaver's adherents are caught in its Web; Terminus necessitates the End of all things, its chosen included – and the Hunt dogs the steps of even its most steadfast Hunters.

Still, whether one sees it as a gift or a curse, the Hunt bestows upon its subjects abilities as formidable as those of any other Power. By now, Jon is well-acquainted with the sharp reflexes, superhuman senses, and uncanny stealth that a fully-fledged hunter boasts.

All of this to say: Jon is excruciatingly aware that the only reason he can hear Julia's and Trevor's encroaching footsteps at all is because they *want* him to know they're closing in on him. Because they're savoring the experience – both their own thrills and the palpable fear of their quarry.

At least the suspense doesn't last long. Between one second and the next, as if crossing an event horizon, they emerge from the gloom.

"There you are," Trevor drawls. The hunger in his eyes is unnervingly familiar. "We've been looking for you."

"Thought we'd have to stake out your Institute," Julia says airily. "Imagine our luck, running across you when you're out in the open. Exposed."

It's strange, Jon thinks to himself, the detours an adrenaline-addled mind can take. Unsticking his frozen fight-or-flight response should be his foremost concern, yet his recalcitrant brain chooses this moment to recall any number of nature documentaries he has devoured over the years.

Specifically: the jagged grins on the Hunters' faces inundate his mind with vivid images of hyenas disemboweling their prey, still alive and writhing in agony.

"You followed us." Basira casts a questioning look in Jon's direction.

"I – I didn't notice," Jon says, chagrined. Before Basira can respond, Trevor cuts in again.

"Of course you didn't." The hyena-grimace cracks wider, revealing an uneven row of too-sharp teeth. "You weren't listening for it. You're used to being chased, but it's been a minute

since you've been tracked by a *real* hunter, hasn't it?"

"We were going to intercept you on the way," Julia says. "But–"

"She was too curious to see where you were slinking off to," Trevor interrupts. "As it turns out, you lead us to more monsters."

"Aren't you glad we held off?" Julia says with a smug leer.

"You two aren't exactly human yourselves," Basira points out.

"Sometimes it takes a monster to hunt monsters," Julia says.

And because Jon's impulses seem chronically determined to respond to life-threatening peril with cheek, what he says is: "One of the prison guards tasked with overseeing your father once gave a statement–"

"–the sort of things you have to have done to end up in Wakefield – murderous filth – the closest thing this world had to real monsters – I won't even pretend I was proportional in my use of force – sometimes you need a bastard to keep an eye on the monsters–"

It takes a few seconds for him to become conscious of Basira shaking him by the shoulder.

"What did I *just say* about antagonizing people who want to kill you?" she scolds once his eyes focus on her – but Julia only gives a lazy shrug.

"Well, he was right," she says. Apparently the verbatim statement recitation doesn't strike her as odd enough to comment on it. "My father knew that better than anyone."

Manuela finally emerges from her rapt scrutiny, her eyes widening in recognition. "Montauk." She glances from Julia to Trevor and back again. "You're the ones who took out

Darvish."

"And you're next." Julia's teeth gleam in the torchlight. Just like Trevor's, there's something off-putting about them: her canines longer than they should be, the points just this side of too sharp. The difference is marginal, but just enough to prickle at the edges of one's mind; noticeable enough to induce a second-guessing double-take as surely as any of the Stranger's uncanny ilk. "The Archivist can wait his turn. We need to have a chat with him first, anyway. You, on the other hand–"

Jon has only a fraction of a second to register the glint of the switchblade in Julia's hand before she lunges. The instant she moves a muscle, though, Manuela reacts with spring-loaded velocity. She raises one arm and brings it down, cutting through the air in a diagonal slicing motion. Everything beyond a meter radius from herself, Jon, and Basira is swallowed up by velvety darkness, muffling the world like an unnatural smog. The already-flagging beam of Jon's torch sputters to little more than an eerie glow.

"What is this?" The enraged tremor in Julia's voice doesn't quite drown out the note of fear underpinning the demand. "What did you do?"

"Jule!" Despite Trevor having been only meters from them just a minute prior, his call sounds distant. "Where–?"

"Can't – can't *see–"*

"Which is why I recommend standing in place," Manuela says placidly. "Keep fumbling around in the Dark and you'll only hurt yourselves." Trevor lets loose a volley of colorful swears. Unperturbed, Manuela turns her attention back to Jon and Basira. "Let them thrash about all they want. They can't see anything where they are."

"For how long?" Basira asks.

"Long enough," Manuela says. "Go."

“W-wait,” Jon protests weakly, “we haven’t–”

“Would you prefer to continue this discussion *here*, with an audience of rabid dogs?” In the dim, flickering light, Jon can just barely make out her meaningful glare. “Wait outside. I’ll join you once I have what I need.”

“Skulking in the shadows like a *coward,*” Julia manages to seethe between choked breaths.

“Taunt all you like,” Manuela replies coolly. “My ego can take it.”

A new rush of threats and expletives follows, at which Manuela only rolls her eyes. Basira gives Jon a light nudge to get his attention.

“Any idea where the exit is?” she asks, the words frayed with exhaustion and lingering adrenaline.

“Ah… no.” Jon gives the torch in his hand a halfhearted shake, as if that will make its dampened light any more useful against the darkness.

“Somewhere over there,” Manuela says with a vague shooing motion. “Just start walking that way. Once you’re beyond the veil’s reach, you should be able to make out the exit.” A pause. “Probably.”

“And the Hunters?” Basira asks.

“In a lightless place,” Manuela says. “You could stand right next to them and they wouldn’t be able to see you.”

“Not for long,” Trevor promises in a low snarl. “The chase doesn’t end here.”

“No,” Jon agrees, soft enough as to be inaudible. *It never does, does it?*

“Let’s go,” Basira urges, grabbing Jon’s sleeve and tugging him onward. She doesn’t let go as they start to gingerly move towards (hopefully) the exit. Jon is glad of it. He suspects she may harbor the same primal, childlike impulse as he does in this moment – *hold my hand so we don’t get separated, so I don’t get lost, so I know I’m not alone* – and her initiative saves both of them from having to acknowledge that dread aloud.

True to Manuela’s words, it isn’t long before they stumble out of whatever preternatural bubble had been enclosing them. Once again, Jon is reminded of crossing an event horizon. One moment, they’re encircled on all sides by oppressive darkness; in the next, they can see. Somewhat. The warehouse is still murky, but Jon can at least make out their surroundings.

Looking over his shoulder, he half-expects to see… he doesn’t know – some sort of impenetrable void, a writhing mass of shadows, an unfathomable wall of Darkness – but there’s nothing there. No sign of Manuela or the Hunters. The area from which they came *is* darker, but it’s a gradient rather than the abrupt border he had perceived when walking out of it. It’s not even completely dark at the center. Yet, his eyes refuse to perceive what’s there, sliding over that space as if his sight is magnetically opposed to it.

“Like an optical illusion, isn’t it?” Basira says from beside him. She still hasn’t let go of his sleeve. “Like I can physically see it, but the actual visual input gets lost in translation by the time the signal reaches my brain.”

“I hate it,” Jon murmurs absently.

“So do I.” Basira shivers. She pulls on his sleeve once more before releasing her hold. “Come on. Let’s wait outside.”

Martin has been rereading the same line of the same statement for the past five minutes, not taking any of it in. He’s just about to give up – or take a break, at least – when Daisy apparently tires of whatever game she’s hooked on now. She pushes her laptop away, stretches, leans back in her chair – and her eyes settle on Martin.

“What?” he says warily. He’s still learning to read her moods, but if he had to hazard a guess, he would categorize this particular look as *bored and therefore craving mischief.*

“He was flirting with you,” she says, apropos of nothing, confirming his suspicions.

“Oh, for the love of – this again?” Martin cries. He throws his head back to stare at the ceiling and smacks the statement down onto the desk. “For the *last time*–”

“He *was!”* Daisy insists. “I swear, he was looking at you like you were a piece of meat–”

“Yeah, because he wanted to – to throw me off a building or something, feed me to his god.”

“He threatened to toss me off a building, too, but he didn’t look at me like *that* when he said it.” Daisy’s smirk widens. “Face it, Blackwood: you’re Fear catnip. Or maybe you just attract creepy old rich men. Like flies to honey.”

“Flies are actually more attracted by vinegar than honey,” Martin mutters.

“Alright, *Jon,*” Daisy says. “He’s gonna come home only to find that the esteemed title of resident pedantic swot has been hijacked by his most trusted confidant.” Tutting, she shakes her head. “For shame, Blackwood.”

“Piss off,” Martin says amiably. “Anyway, the way Simon was talking, I’m pretty sure the sky is his one true love.”

“I dunno.” Martin can *hear* the smirk in Daisy’s voice, and he dreads whatever she’s about to say next. “Guy seemed like a swinger to me–”

Martin puts his head in his hands with a protracted groan. Daisy – *damn her* – just laughs at the display.

"I'm starting to regret letting you stay for that conversation," he sighs.

"I think I saved you from a wannabe sugar daddy propositioning – okay, okay!" Daisy puts her hands up in a mollifying gesture the moment Martin turns a glare on her, but he can see her fighting back a grin. "I'll stop. Even though I'm right."

Martin lets out an amused snort in spite of himself. If he's perfectly honest, something about Daisy's affectionate teasing elicits a sense of belonging. It's similar to the sort of banter she employs with Jon and Basira.

It's only because she misses them, says that stubborn, insidious little voice entrenched in the core of him. *You're a temporary substitute–*

Martin shuts down that train of thought with relish.

He and Daisy have one thing in common, at least: they don't like to be alone. Usually they just coexist in the same space, each minding their own business, but that time spent together has gradually progressed from tense to tolerable to something approaching companionable.

It's not that Martin has forgiven her. It's just that… well, their lives are, as Daisy so eloquently puts it, *messed up.* Under such dire circumstances, he isn't all that surprised that his own standards for what qualifies as a friendly acquaintance are as skewed as Jon's are.

And no matter how much Martin wants to discount it, she *does* seem sincere. Even when she's being flippant, there's an uneasy sort of timidity there. Submissiveness, almost. It's so at odds with who she used to be, it sometimes seems like she's become an entirely different person.

The more time Martin spends with her, the more he picks up on the chronic, heavy guilt that weighs her down: the permanent sag in her posture, the dejected curve to her spine, her hunched shoulders, how often her countenance defaults to a downturned mouth and a downcast gaze. No amount of playful banter can fully conceal the shame that lines her features or the regret that dwells in her eyes.

She's like Jon. Martin hates making the comparison – he'll swear up and down that their situations are *not* exactly the same – but it's difficult to overlook the resemblance. They both move through the world cradling guilt close to their chests like it's a saving grace, wearing shame as if it's the closest thing to redemption – to *humanity* – that remains within their grasp.

They're both *trying.* Desperate, afraid, and taking turns playing the pessimist – but *trying.* It has to count for something – and according to Jon, if that goes for him, then it goes for Daisy as well. Martin might not be able to forgive or forget – nor does he feel obligated to – but… well, his tendency to hold a grudge aside, part of him has always wanted to believe in second chances.

Beyond that, Jonah's scheming has ensnared all of them – *together* – in a web of fear and resentment. Martin can't shake the conviction that untangling that web will take every ounce of trust the group of them can muster, regardless of whether it's deserved.

"You alright?" Daisy says.

"Huh?"

"Looked like you were sort of… spacing out a bit."

"It's fine," Martin says. "Just thinking."

"Dangerous hobby."

“That it is,” says a new voice.

Daisy whips around so quickly Martin swears he hears her neck crack underneath her low snarl.

“Peter.” Martin can feel his entire demeanor reflexively shift when he lays eyes on the figure looming in the doorway. “You could’ve informed me that you were taking a sabbatical. I would’ve practiced forging your signature *before* the paperwork started piling up.”

Maybe it should be cause for concern, how quickly Martin transitions to the aloof, stiff manner of the Lonely. In this moment, he’s only grateful he can still tap into that mindset. It makes it that much easier to keep up appearances.

“Urgent business, I’m afraid. It’s quite a handful, captaining a ship from a distance and running this place at the same time.”

“What do you mean, running this place?” Martin scoffs. “You don’t *do* anything except sign off on my work.”

“And apparently now you don’t even need me to do that!” Peter says, mock-cheerfully. “You really are quite the capable assistant, you know. I knew you could handle it.”

“Then why did you even bother showing up? You obviously prefer the Tundra.”

“I believe we’re overdue for a chat.”

“You could’ve just called and saved us both the nuisance.”

“Finicky things, phones. Never quite got the hang of them. Horrid invention.”

Martin rolls his eyes at the familiar complaint. Peter is a self-admitted technophobe, but Martin suspects that's less due to ineptitude and more because Peter innately and categorically disapproves of anything that fosters long-distance communication. The internet in particular was an unforgivable slight, in his estimation. After all, the more potential people have to connect with one another, the lesser their risk for seclusion and alienation.

"Anyway, some things really are best discussed in person." Peter's lip curls in disgust. "Unfortunately."

"For the both of us," Martin grumbles.

"That's the spirit." Peter turns his attention to Daisy. "The Beholding is audience enough, however. We have no need of yet *another* voyeur looking on."

"Tough," Daisy says. "I'm not leaving you alone with him."

Peter's mouth curves into another frosty, artificial smile. "Fascinating species, Hunters. I'm most familiar with the lone wolf types, myself." Daisy scowls. "You've done your fair share of solitary hunting, but it's not what you're made for, is it? Given the choice, you prefer to run with a pack."

"Peter," Martin says warningly. He can feel the temperature creeping ever downward by incremental degrees.

"You were languishing alone in that Coffin for – what, seven months? Eight? Tell me, what was worse – being buried alive, or being forsaken?"

"Shut up," Daisy says. Her voice is measured, but her breath fogs on its way out.

"That's enough, Peter," Martin says sharply. Then, to Daisy: "You should go."

“But–”

“Go.”

Daisy makes a show of hesitating, but Martin knows it’s only for effect. With her back to Peter, she flashes a brief conspiratorial smile at Martin before feigning a resigned sigh and a reluctant nod. As she leaves, Martin has to admit that she does a fairly decent impression of sulking off with her tail between her legs. Judging from the smug look on Peter’s face, he’s fallen for the ruse.

“Now then,” he says crisply. “Simon tells me he spoke with you.”

“Don’t know why you bothered sending him, really. He said he’d be better at explaining the esoteric side of things, but he was as cryptic as you are. I mean, were you expecting him to persuade me?”

“Honestly, Martin, at this point I was hoping he would talk some *sense* into you.”

“Odd choice, recruiting someone like him to do that,” Martin says coolly. “He didn’t seem overly concerned about the Extinction.”

“Yes, Simon likes to think that he can make peace with any outcome. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t see the Extinction as a very real threat.”

“Sure, but he didn’t feel strongly enough to actually *do* anything about it.” Martin glares. “There’s a lot of that going around.”

“I have been *attempting* to do something about it.”

“No, you’ve been trying to pawn the responsibility off on *me* without telling me what your plan actually *is*.”

“As you are now, you’re unsuited for your role in it. There’s no need for you to know the details if you have no intention to play your part.”

“I’m plenty Lonely.”

Martin wishes it was purely a bluff, but he’s not naïve enough to believe that rejecting the Lonely was a one-and-done decision. Several times a day, he has to shut down that little voice in his head that tries to coax him towards solitude and the convincing illusion of safety it promises.

“Are you really?” Peter raises his eyebrows. “These days I’m not so certain.”

Martin fixes his eyes on the floor. “I don’t think I can picture myself without it.”

Saying it aloud only reinforces the truth of the statement: it feels as if some kernel of loneliness will always dwell at his center, trapping him in its orbit. Martin may have no intention of choosing the Lonely, but that doesn’t change how pervasive its mindset can be. It’s been the lens through which he’s viewed the world for as long as he can remember.

When you’re already on the inside looking out, it can be difficult to shift perspective, Martin remembers Oliver saying. He wasn’t wrong.

“There’s more than enough for me to draw on if it comes down to it,” Martin says – and that too is probably closer to the truth than he would like. “Meantime, I think our chances are better the more people we have working on the problem.”

“I thought you were a clever lad.” Peter slowly shakes his head. “More clever than this, at least.”

“I really don’t care,” Martin says automatically. “Anyway, it wasn’t necessary to send someone to theorize at me. I get plenty of that from Jon and Basira.” Peter makes a face like he’s tasted something foul. “I know you’re allergic to teamwork, but they can *help.”*

“And where has that gotten you so far, hm? Any miraculous insights I should know about?”

“W-well – nothing *conclusive*, but – we did settle on some of the same theories that Simon did?”

“Which are?”

“Well, he thinks the Extinction *is* going to manifest as its own power, but that there’s no way for us to know how or when or what it will mean for us. I know you think it’ll be worse than the birth of any other power, but that’s not a given. There’s as much of a chance that it’ll be just one more terror for the roster, same as when the Flesh was born. Which is exactly what I told you before, so I don’t know why you needed to send Simon to float theories that we’re *already* considering.”

“And your evidence?”

“We got to talking about Rituals,” Martin says. He has to tread carefully here: equivocate just enough to assuage Peter that his goal is still attainable, that Martin is still a promising wager, but not so much as to inspire him to step up his meddling – or, perhaps worse, to tire of the game and upend the board entirely, players and pawns be damned. “We’ve dug up several statements that seem to refer to past Rituals, and – well, most of the Powers have made an attempt at one point or another. As far as we can tell, the odd ones out are the Eye, the Web, and the End. Jon says it’s hard for him to Know anything about the Eye, but he has a theory about the Web and the End – that they’ve never tried a Ritual because they’re fine with the world as it is. We figured that maybe… maybe the Extinction will be the same.”

“Martin,” Peter sighs, shaking his head with a particularly condescending flavor of pity. “He’s only telling you what he wants you to hear.”

Martin doesn't notice how tightly he's clenching his jaw until he feels a twinge. As he forces himself to untense, he takes a moment to consider whether a cracked tooth due to an inconceivably *infuriating* boss would fall under workers' comp.

"I don't know why you assume I'll just go along with whatever Jon says. I'm not some – some helpless child. I'm capable of my own insights. Of doing my own research. I just *also* recognize that whatever I can do on my own won't be enough. I'm not exactly a *chosen one,* assuming such a thing even exists. If we're all doing our own independent investigations anyway, it only makes sense to pool our findings. The more information we have gathered in one place, the better our chances."

"This is still all just *theory*. If we treat the Extinction like an existential threat to us all and it turns out not to be, no harm done. But if we *don't* take it seriously, and it *is* as bad as I predict…" Peter levels Martin with a stare. "Better to be overprepared than underprepared, given the stakes."

"With the evidence we have so far, I think our theory holds more water than yours does." Another pause as Martin considers how much to divulge. In his experience, the best ruse contains a grain of truth. "We consulted with an Avatar of the End, you know."

"That grim fellow who visited the Archives," Peter says. "I wondered what that was about."

"Research involves actual investigative legwork, shockingly. You know – actually *following up* on what you learn instead of just *speculating* about it?"

"That's what assistants are for, isn't it?"

"*Anyway*," Martin says tersely, "he talked in circles as much as Simon did, but it was still enlightening. Oliver said that the End has no need to bring on an apocalypse because the end of all things is already inevitable. This *is* the End's ideal habitat, and it always will be, right up until the moment *everything* ends. It lends more weight to the theory that the same will be true for the Extinction. People will always be afraid of change and endings – and catastrophic change has been a constant for as long as humanity – as long as the *universe* has existed. Why would the Extinction have a reason to change the world when it's already such a perfect niche for it?"

“You’re taking a *very* large gamble.”

“Well, that’s what you get for sending a nihilist to talk my ear off about the ‘big picture,’” Martin says with a shrug. “I’m going to keep looking into it. I haven’t ruled anything out yet, your plan included. But right now, there’s too much reasonable doubt. Too many unanswered questions. We need more information before we make any decisions, and I don’t think the Extinction is going to emerge tomorrow. We have time, and we should use it to come up with the best possible solution before acting.”

“I hope for all of our sakes that you’re right about that,” Peter says icily, “but I don’t think you are.”

“Well, if you come up with convincing evidence of that, I assume I’ll be the first to know.”

“You will. Assuming you don’t wait too long, that is. There is such a thing as too late. Why take that risk when a workable solution is already at hand?”

“Because I *know* your ‘solution’ – whatever it is – will get people hurt.”

“No one who will be missed,” Peter says mildly. “It requires sacrifice, yes, but nothing that can’t be endured. Most importantly, the others will be safe.”

“But I won’t be coming back, will I?”

“It won’t *kill* you, but no. You won’t be. And I think you’ll find it quite liberating, to be honest. The last self-sacrifice you’ll ever have to suffer. There’s no need to burden yourself with others, especially when you know it will only ever hurt.” There’s a gentle, mentoring quality to the words. Superficial, of course, like nearly everything else about Peter’s presentation, but there’s a part of Martin that latches onto it nonetheless. “But if you *do* insist on caring about them, I remind you that you *were* willing to go to any lengths to protect them. You know they’ll be just fine without you. No one is so important that their absence won’t fade with time.”

Martin says nothing, only clenches his teeth harder and keeps his eyes riveted on the floor.

"I suggest you review your options *very* carefully." Peter seems to loom larger, an unmistakably malevolent undertone to his voice now. "Think about what's most important to you, and whether it's important enough for you to do what needs to be done to protect it."

"There's a stack of paperwork on your desk," Martin blurts out. The tremble in his voice undermines the snarky nonchalance for which he had been aiming. "I didn't get around to forging your signature on all of them just yet," he continues, in more of a dejected mumble now.

When Martin glances up nearly a minute later, Peter is gone. It's a rare occasion when Peter allows Martin to have the last word, but the silence he left behind is weighty enough to feel like a statement all on its own.

Speaking of statements…

With a shivering exhale, Martin forces himself to return to the horror story he'd been skimming earlier. It's evident straightaway that it's an exercise in futility: if he was distracted before Peter's visit, the combination of lingering brain fog and simmering agitation makes focusing all but impossible now. Instead, he settles for pretending to read.

He's itching to go meet up with Daisy in the tunnels – partly because it's what they prearranged, but also largely because he *really* doesn't want to be alone right now – but too much haste might arouse suspicion in anyone who happens to be watching. It's a familiar dance at this point, couching his motives in a buffer of extraneous activity.

He manages to endure several more minutes of feigned reading before his jitters get the best of him. Dropping the statement onto the desk, he sighs in what he hopes is a convincing rendition of *underpaid, disillusioned office grunt succumbing to eyestrain and calling it a day.* Luckily, he has ample personal experience on which to draw.

Still, he has to force himself to casually trudge rather than eagerly scamper off to the tunnels. By the time he gets there, Daisy is already waiting for him.

“You okay?” she asks immediately.

“Fine, yeah.”

“Are you really, though?” Martin has been on the receiving end of Daisy's stare before, but like so many other things about her, this too has changed. She’s not seeking out vulnerabilities to exploit, but rather analyzing weak spots that need protecting. “You seem rattled.”

“Peter has that effect on people,” Martin says tiredly.

“What did he–”

“He didn’t say or do anything out of the ordinary. It was more or less the same conversation I had with him the last time we spoke. He’s nothing if not tedious.” Daisy looks skeptical. “Really, I’m fine. Though… I don’t know how much longer I can string him along. He seems to be getting impatient.” Martin bites his lip. “And…”

I suggest you review your options very *carefully,* Peter’s voice echoes.

“And…?”

“I don’t know,” Martin says. “It was – sort of vague, but I think he may have given me an ultimatum, or a – a veiled threat?”

“How do you mean?”

“He told me to consider ‘what’s most important’ to me and how far I would go to protect it, and…” Martin looks off to the side, rubbing the back of his neck. “I mean, it’s probably safe to assume he was referring to Jon, right?”

“So, ‘cooperate or else.’”

“I think that was the gist,” Martin says quietly, then shakes his head. There’s no use dwelling on it right this second. They can tackle it once Jon and Basira get back. “How’d things go on your end? Did you find it?”

With a flourish, Daisy pulls a weathered tome out of the messenger bag hanging at her side.

“The Seven Lamps of Architecture,” she says, placing it on Jon’s mess of a table-turned-desk. Then she reaches back into her bag and procures a yellowed pamphlet. “This was with it, too.”

Martin squints at the faded cover. At first, the title is too faint to make out, but the longer he stares, the more distinct the lettering becomes, like a ship emerging from a foggy horizon.

“A Disappearance,” he murmurs vaguely. It rings a bell. If he could just–

Daisy takes an abrupt step backwards, pulling the pamphlet out of Martin’s reach. Only then does he notice his own outstretched hand, grasping fingers trembling in midair.

“Martin?”

Martin gives a faint, bemused hum – not lowering his arm, not withdrawing it, just… flexing his hand, barely able to conceptualize it as part of himself.

“Hey,” Daisy says, more urgently now. “Look at me. *Martin.”*

It takes a drawn moment for Martin to obey the instruction, looking to Daisy with a sluggish blink. He only manages to hold her gaze for a few seconds before his attention drifts back to the pamphlet in her hand. Tracking his line of sight, she frowns and tucks it back inside her bag.

The instant it's out of sight, an arctic chill runs through Martin from head to toe. The sensation is sharp and all-encompassing, akin to having a bucket of ice water upended over him. He sucks in a sharp breath and immediately regrets it: the frigid air is like shards of glass in his lungs.

"What's wrong?" Daisy's brow furrows as Martin shivers and hugs himself. "Talk to me."

"C-c-cold," Martin grits out through his chattering teeth. He glances around fretfully, half-expecting Peter to make another appearance.

"Not really?"

"You – you d-don't feel it?"

"I mean – tunnel's always a bit on the chilly side, I guess, but it's not–" Daisy halts abruptly. "Your breath's fogging." Pointedly, she exhales. "Mine's not."

But I had been doing so well, Martin tries to say, but his tongue won't cooperate. Daisy's lips are moving, but Martin can't make out the words through the ringing in his ears. Distantly, he can feel his shallow breathing quicken. The edges of his vision are just starting to pixelate when Daisy takes a step forward and snaps her fingers in front of his face, snagging a fragment of his attention.

"Be here," she orders. "You're not allowed to disappear on my watch, alright?"

“Disappear,” Martin says vaguely.

“Yeah. I’m the one who has to tell Jon if you go MIA, and I *really* don’t want to have that conversation, so–”

“I’m here,” Martin says, his mind circling the statement with intent. Closing his eyes, he counts out his breaths in measured seconds – *in-four; hold-seven; out-eight* – and tries to focus on the sensation of being present. “I’m here.”

As the haze clears, it gradually makes room for rational thought. *It’s not me,* he tells himself. Whatever *that* was just now, it didn’t come from inside *him.*

A Disappearance. There’s a reason it sounds familiar. Thinking back, Jon *had* mentioned its existence before. If he were to open it, Martin is certain he would find a Leitner bookplate within. There’s virtually no chance it isn’t aligned with the Lonely. Of course it would have a potent effect on him, same as how the Slaughter’s bayonet influenced Melanie. Same as how the presence of the Web’s table, bound as it was to the NotThem, fueled and fed on Jon’s paranoia. Same as any number of Fear-touched artefacts and books and monsters outlined in the statements comprising the Archives.

“Sorry,” Martin wheezes, forcefully expelling the last dregs of fog from his lungs. “Just – had a moment.”

“Guess I was right not to open it,” Daisy says delicately. Then, her expression twisting into one of self-directed frustration: “Should’ve known it belonged to the Lonely. *Stupid.”*

“It’s fine,” Martin says. “I’m fine.”

“I’ll burn it.” She hitches her bag higher on her shoulder as emphasis. “Both of them. As soon as possible.”

Martin hesitates. “Don’t you think we should wait until Jon and Basira get back? I mean, Leitner managed to use them for years with no ill effects, right? Maybe they could be useful.”

“By the time Jon and Basira get back, Lukas might notice they’re missing. Besides, you know how Jon feels about Leitners.”

“Right,” Martin sighs. Jon has been known to play with fire, but he probably *would* draw the line at experimenting with anything bearing one of Leitner's bookplates.

“He was just grumbling the other day about how the only good Leitner is a torched one,” Daisy says.

“Yeah, but was he referring the books or the man?”

Daisy snorts. “I assumed the former, but thinking back, he *was* in a bit of a mood. He could’ve meant both. Either way, these are definitely kindling as far as Jon’s concerned.”

“I guess,” Martin says. “What about, um… do you think Jonah Saw you?”

According to Jon, the Head of the Institute’s office is something of an obscurity. That was likely the case even before Peter took possession of it, but before the Unknowing, Jon had only just been coming into his power. After awakening from his coma, Jon had been more persistent about trying to See and Know things. He’d always had little success where Peter was concerned, and his office was no exception. *Too foggy,* Jon said.

When Basira asked whether the same held true for Jonah, Jon was uncertain. The office originally belonged to Jonah, after all; even now, Jonah no doubt sees Peter’s presence there as temporary, superficial, and ultimately subject to Jonah’s own whims. But in the interim, it’s Peter’s domain. Martin has seen firsthand how thoroughly the fog has permeated the place. If the Lonely’s presence hinders Jonah’s Sight as much as it does Jon’s, there’s a distinct possibility that Jonah was unable to observe Daisy’s movements once she passed the threshold.

“I didn’t *feel* like I was being Watched,” Daisy says. “No more than usual, at least. But it’s hard to know for sure. I nabbed some statements while I was there, though. ‘Accidentally’ let one of them stick out of my bag as I was leaving. Figured that on the chance that he *couldn’t* See what I was doing in there, maybe he’ll assume statements were all I took.”

“Here’s hoping.” Martin chews on his thumbnail, brow furrowing as he ponders. “You know, if he *was* watching, I wonder if he’d even bother telling Peter about it?”

“Don’t know. But the possibility is just another reason to burn them as soon as possible. If Lukas steals them back, I doubt we’d be able to get our hands on them again.” Daisy hunches her shoulders and averts her eyes, taking on a gloomy air. “And… maybe this is the Hunt talking, but – I *hate* the idea of these things escaping back into the wild. On principle.”

“So do I.”

Daisy nods curtly before pulling a lighter out of her pocket. “Then we’ll burn them.”

“Wh– right now?”

“No time like the present.” There’s a grim edge to her half-smirk as she nudges *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* across the table and towards Martin. “I’ll handle the other, but do you want to do the honors with this one? I might think your plan during the Unknowing was an outlier, except Jon mentioned you have an arsonist streak.”

Martin hems and haws for only a few seconds before abandoning all plausible deniability and shamelessly holding his hand out.

“Thought so,” Daisy says approvingly, dropping the lighter into Martin’s upturned palm.

Given its remote location and sporadic transportation options, arranging emergency passage away from Ny-Ålesund should have been a logistical nightmare. However, in an unexpected stroke of good fortune, Manuela has an escape route at the ready.

"You think Maxwell left me resourceless?" she sneers in response to Jon's surprise – and, yes, perhaps it shouldn't have been so unexpected. The People's Church was hardly lacking in assets or structure, and this was once their stronghold. It would have been difficult to operate and maintain a low profile without an independent means of transport under their control.

It's just that he isn't accustomed to things being easy. A private plane just sitting in a hangar, with legitimate permits and documentation, *and* with a capable and willing pilot at the ready? In his experience, that many conveniences in a row definitely qualifies as too good to be true.

"You know how to fly this thing?" Basira watches with transparent skepticism as Manuela loads and secures her precious cargo: a large, black metal case on wheels with three heavy-duty locks, the remnants of a miscarried apocalypse nestled within.

"Are you demanding to see my *license,* Officer?" Manuela pauses only long enough to shoot a glare over her shoulder. "It's a VLJ," she grumbles, "not a 747. Or a space shuttle – which I've *also* piloted, should you need reminding."

Once Manuela performs a pre-flight inspection and deems the aircraft serviceable, it's a short, direct flight from Ny-Ålesund to Oslo – which is the limits of Manuela's forbearance, it seems. Their feet have barely touched the tarmac when she announces that this is where they part ways.

"If you can't manage your way to London from here," she says, "I doubt you're competent enough to execute a revenge plot."

"How long do we have before the Hunters catch up?" Basira asks.

"Not my problem." Manuela examines her cuticles in an obvious display of indifference. "They'll have found their way back into the light by now, but getting back to the mainland

may prove a challenge."

"Don't know how they followed us in the first place," Basira says. "Kings Bay runs all the charter flights and cruise ships, and there were none scheduled for arrival or departure for the next few weeks. I checked. And something tells me they don't have the luxury of a private jet."

"No," Jon confirms. "They don't."

There is no larger pack for Julia and Trevor to fall back on, let alone the sort of age-old dynasty or organizational clout of which other Avatars can boast. They don't have the benefit of a well-established Institute, a prominent family name, or a wealthy business empire. They don't have the buying power to dabble in cutting-edge aerospace technology, fund shady commercial ventures, or bribe their way past official channels. They don't *network* like the Fairchilds, Lukases, Rayners, and Jonah Magnuses of the world. Where other Avatars make bets, call in favors, strike uneasy alliances, and keep tabs on one another, vigilantes like Julia and Trevor answer only to the call of the blood and to one another.

"I… I think they stowed away on our ship," Jon says quietly.

Basira glances at him sharply. "What?"

"I mean – unless they arrived before we did, it's the only thing that makes sense, isn't it? Ours is the last ship that docked before they caught up to us. And they implied they'd been following us for some time. S-so, unless they commandeered a pleasure craft and docked without anyone noticing, or – or – or *swam,* then…"

A knot of retrospective dread writhes at the center of Jon's chest. How long *had* the Hunters been stalking them? How had he not sensed them watching? What else doesn't he Know?

"Hopefully that's the case, then," Basira says.

Jon gapes at her incredulously. “What?”

“The ship’s next port of call was Greenland, remember? We were going to have to take a flight back to London from there. They’ll have to stowaway on the same ship and take that detour, unless they want to wait for a ship leaving from Ny-Ålesund headed back this way. Either way, it should slow them down. Especially if they have to travel illegally. You said the reason they were stranded in America for so long was because they didn’t have the documentation to travel via legitimate channels, right?”

“Yes, but – obviously they found a way around that.”

“It still puts them at a disadvantage. We have a decent enough head start to stay ahead of them.” Basira turns back to Manuela. “Where are you headed from here?”

“I’ll make my own way. The Dark Sun will keep me hidden.” She glares at Jon. “Including from the Eye.”

“Good,” Jon says. “The less Elias Knows, the better.”

Indeed, as unnerving as it is having the Dark Sun in such close proximity, even packaged safely away as it is, being in Jonah’s blind spot has been a solace. Once Manuela departs, Jon won’t have another reprieve from Jonah’s particular brand of voyeurism until they arrive back at the Institute and the relative safety of the tunnels.

“I’ll be in touch when the solstice nears,” Manuela says. “I trust you’ll have the details sorted by then.”

“We will,” Basira replies, but Manuela is already stalking off without a backward glance.

“Well then.” Jon runs a hand through his hair, an exhausted sigh shuddering out of him. “That could’ve gone worse, I suppose.”

“Hm. Could’ve gone better, too.” Basira shakes her head, then winces slightly, one hand reaching up to massage her forehead. “Whatever. We’ve done all we can do here. Ready to go home?”

“More than,” Jon says gratefully.

“Think we’ll luck out and find two empty seats on a direct flight to London by morning?”

“No,” Jon says, though he doubts she was asking sincerely. The two of them agreed weeks ago that commercial flight would be a last resort. They *had* determined the aforementioned flight from Greenland to be such a necessary evil, and Jon spent ample time dreading a worst-case scenario: boarding a plane, realizing too late that one of his fellow passengers was harboring a statement, trapping an unsuspecting person tens of thousands of feet in the air in a cramped cabin with a monster pretending at humanity. Now that they've managed to evade that particular detour, they can just as easily get back to London by rail. A more circuitous route, to be sure, but safer.

“Of course not.” Judging from the way Basira is pressing her fingers into the bridge of her nose, Jon suspects she has a headache brewing.

“If it’s any consolation, I *do* Know the shortest route to the airport café?”

“Come on, then,” Basira sighs, shouldering her bag. “I need caffeine before I can even *think* about drafting an itinerary.”

Chapter End Notes

Not pictured:

Jon, dead-on-his-feet tired after traipsing up to the north pole for his regularly-scheduled bullying session from his eldritch peers: So, Daisy and Martin alone in the Archives for over a week. What crimes did they commit?

Martin: heist 😇
Daisy: arson 😈
Jon: oh my god i was JOKING

- Only one instance of Archive-speak in this chapter; it's taken from MAG 052.

- What game is Daisy hooked on now, you ask? She's courting Maru in Stardew Valley. Look, she's a fan of *The Archers*; of COURSE she would vibe with a farming sim. And it's a nice counterbalance to all the PvP & survival horror MMOs she's been sampling.

- I was gonna go into that Dark-powered deus ex machina Manuela pulled out here, but I couldn't find an organic place to infodump about it in-text. But if anyone's wondering why she didn't use that trick last chapter: it's basically an AOE thing; it doesn't work if someone is too close to her. Jon and Basira would've been able to see her as soon as she got close enough to physically engage, so instead of wasting her energy on spooky magic tricks that wouldn't give her much advantage anyway, she opted for a more traditional ambush strategy of "give in to the incandescent rage and just treat your entire body as a projectile and hope for the best."

- I'm sorry it took literally over a month to get this chapter posted aaaaa. It's been pretty busy and I've also been having some problems focusing :/ but!! I'm not abandoning this story, it's just taking me longer than I would like to get words onto the page.

- On that note, I'm sort of iffy on this chapter? But I don't know if that's just because I've been working on it for too long and I'm starting to get tired of staring at it? I hope the confrontation with Julia and Trevor wasn't too short and that the conversation between Martin and Peter wasn't too repetitive, but the more I edit, the less certain I am, so I think I need to just post it and move on with the story. I think I have a better sense of direction (and a more fleshed-out outline) for next chapter though, so please stick with me. <3

- I should also mention – I *think* I'm about ¾ of the way through the story at this point? It's hard for me to estimate bc my outlining process veers towards the sparse-and-variable, but we are getting there. (And then I have some much shorter epilogue fics planned for this AU when the main story is done.)

- Will probably reply to comments from the last chapter over the next few days.

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

- As always, thank you for reading!

To the Wolves

Chapter Summary

The hunt continues.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings for Chapter 28: Hunt-typical themes; mention of canonical character death & the Skin Book; spiders & arachnophobia; somewhat graphic body horror (in the context of a nightmare; includes bodily harm, eye horror, spider-related/infestation body horror, and possible trypophobia triggers - you can skip over the big italicized section if you need to avoid any of those); burn injury imagery (also within a dream); a little bit of dissociation & mental confusion; very brief mention of nausea/vomiting (not in real time or graphic and it's just one line, but mentioning just in case anyone has emetophobia triggers); mild self-harm (scratching, mostly in the context of panic/dissociation); POV Jonah being his usual self (so, abuser logic, manipulation, etc.); discussions of Jon's and Daisy's respective starvation diets (& the physical/mental repercussions thereof).

Let me know if I missed anything!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"…so," Jon concludes, "all things considered, I think it went okay."

Were it possible for Georgie to look any more exasperated than she already does, Jon's halfhearted assertion might have done the trick just now.

"Jon," she says flatly, "I know I've said this before, but your definition of 'okay' needs revising."

"We *did* do what we set out to do," Jon says. "Manuela agreed to cooperate."

“Why are the Hunters so keen on chasing you, anyway?”

“W-well, I’m already the sort of thing they hunt–”

“He stole from them,” Basira cuts in.

“It was the right thing to do,” Jon says. No doubt taken aback by the self-assurance in his voice, Georgie raises an eyebrow in question. “There’s this… book,” he says on a sigh. “Made of skin. With people trapped in its pages.”

“So… a haunted book,” Georgie says slowly.

“Yes,” Jon says. “Quite literally, I suppose. Each page is an account of someone’s death, written on their skin, and when you read it aloud, it sort of… brings them back, temporarily. Or – an impression of them, at least.”

“People bound in a book bound in skin, and it lets you talk to ghosts,” Georgie says. “Got it.”

“Depending on how you define ‘ghost’–” *No.* That semantic tangent can wait. “Not important. The relevant thing is that it *hurts,* being kept indefinitely at the edge of dying. The book came into Julia and Trevor’s possession when they were in America. They were using it to speak to Gerry – Gerard Keay, that is, but he prefers–” Jon falters. *“Preferred* Gerry.”

“He used to work with Gertrude, right?” Martin asks.

“Yes,” Jon says. “He had a wealth of information about the Fears. Said the Hunters were using him as a ‘monster manual.’ He agreed to answer my questions, but only if I promised to destroy his page. Set him free. I couldn’t do it right then, not with the Hunters in the next room, so I tore it out and brought it back here.”

“Do you still have it?” Georgie asks.

“No. I made a promise – though I didn’t actually follow through until just before the Unknowing,” Jon admits, his chin dipping to his chest. “But I did burn it. Which Julia and Trevor took *great* exception to, the last time they found out.”

“So you go to America, get kidnapped for the *third* time, have a ghost ask you for death with dignity, one thing leads to another, and now you’re in your own personal ‘Hounds of Zaroff’ adaptation,” Georgie summarizes, rubbing her temples. *“How* do you get into these situations.”

The statement lacks any hint of an upward lilt that might qualify it as a question, even a rhetorical one. Jon answers anyway.

“Gerry spent his whole life immersed in the supernatural,” he says. “He was never given any choice in the matter, and he… he was *tired.* He deserved…”

He deserved to live, Jon thinks with a flicker of bitter outrage. He deserved more than a stolen childhood and a shoehorned destiny. Deserved better than to be a tool in someone else’s hand, summoned on a whim and snuffed out again as soon as he’d served his use. Deserved to have peace while he was still alive. Barring that, he *certainly* deserved peace in death, and even *that* barest modicum of care had been denied him until long after the fact.

“He deserved to rest,” Jon says, quiet but firm.

Georgie’s expression softens.

“I’m not disputing that, I just…” She leaves the rest of the thought unspoken. “Okay. Bottom line is, the Hunters are hacked off and you can’t just return what you stole to call them off.”

“Even if I could, I wouldn’t.” Jon has a plethora of regrets. Burning Gerry’s page isn’t among them. “They had no right, keeping him like that.”

“Returning the page wouldn’t have made a difference anyway,” Daisy says darkly. “They’re out for blood.”

“That’s probably true,” Jon says. “And not just mine. It’s… not really even about *me?* I mean, it *is*, but – as far as they’re concerned, I’m no different than anything else they’ve hunted. They let me go in America because I could still pass as human back then, but as I am now? They’d mark me as prey even if we’d never crossed paths before, even if I’d never done anything to provoke them. It’s about what I *am*, independent of anything I’ve *done* – and in my future, they decided that everyone in this building was monstrous by association. We should assume the same is true now.”

“You’re not completely defenseless, though,” Basira says. “I watched you compel Breekon and Manuela. I know you don’t like doing it, but you *are* probably more powerful than the Hunters at this point.”

“I’m also more powerful than the average house spider. That doesn’t mean I won’t panic and twist my ankle trying to get away from one.”

“True story,” Georgie whispers in a loud aside.

“It was a *very* large spider. And fast.” Enough so that his fight-or-flight response deliberated for mere microseconds before settling soundly on *vault over the back of the sofa and damn the consequences.* “I stand by my actions.”

Basira heaves a pointed sigh.

“I *can* try to use compulsion, if it comes to that,” Jon says, allowing himself to be steered back on topic, “but… I’m not used to compelling more than one person at a time, I don’t know how long I’d be able to hold them off, and if I’ve gone too long without a statement…” He grimaces. “Well, they prefer a challenge, but they’re not opposed to picking off prey when it’s weak.”

“Okay,” Georgie says, “so what do we *do* about it?”

“I could ask Peter to hire more security?” Martin says. “Or… actually, I can just do it myself. I think he signs off on most of the things I leave on his desk without even reading them. Half the time he doesn’t even bother to do that anymore, ever since he realized I’d rather forge his signature than email him endless reminders to do his job, which will *also* go unread.”

Daisy snorts. “You should just give yourself a raise at this point.”

Normally, Jon might join in on the banter, but Martin’s suggestion has alarm bells ringing in his head.

“I… don’t know if we should be bringing more people into the Institute’s fold,” Jon says – tentatively, but with growing certainty once he’s spoken the thought aloud.

“I was thinking the same thing,” Georgie says.

Daisy tilts her head to the side, humming in thought. “What about contracting an outside firm?”

Georgie frowns. “What difference would that make?”

“Well, you’d be hiring a *company,*” Daisy says. “A middleman, to act as a buffer between the new hires and the Institute itself. Skip the separate employment contracts for each individual, deliberately write in loopholes to give people an out.”

“Make any stipulations apply only to the corporate entity,” Basira says, following Daisy’s logic. “Might be enough to dodge the no-quitting clause.”

“Does the Beholding *work* like that, though?” Martin asks. “I mean, what do the Fears care about human contract law?”

Everyone immediately turns their attention to Jon.

"I – I don't know?" he says. "I'm not… I'm not the Eye's *attorney*."

"You said you Knew everything before," Daisy says. Jon doesn't bother suppressing an irate groan: he's *gone over this*.

"I said I had the *ability* to Know any– *almost* anything. But I still had to ask the question. I couldn't just know every single thing every waking second – and I was a bit preoccupied by the ongoing apocalypse to study legal theory rendered defunct by, you know, *the ongoing apocalypse*. The physical laws of the universe were rewritten. I promise you, human systems of law and government didn't fare any better." Jon breathes a humorless laugh. "Those concepts were only relevant insofar as they could be used as trappings for some sort of niche nightmare domain."

"Maybe the Fears have more constraints now than they did where you're from," Basira says, disregarding Jon's flaring irascibility. "Whatever internal logic they follow, it uses mortal minds as a framework. The Rituals are proof enough of that. Even though they don't work as intended, they still have measurable effects. Otherwise the Unknowing wouldn't have been so…"

"Disorientating," Jon murmurs, swallowing hard. Basira offers a stiff nod, her eyes taking on an uncharacteristically vacant look. Daisy reaches over to grab her hand, interlacing their fingers without comment.

"There's power in words," Martin says, picking up Basira's train of thought where she abandoned it. "The incantation Jonah forced you to read – it didn't come direct from the Eye, or any of the Fears. Jonah wrote it himself, right? He made it up out of whole cloth, but it still worked. And – and the statements. If they were just *words,* why would they have a life of their own?"

"All I had to do to stop you showing up in my dreams was break into Lukas's office and sign an employment contract," Daisy adds, glancing briefly at Jon before turning her attention back to Basira, running a thumb over the back of her hand in a soothing rhythm. "Didn't take some magic spell to tie me to the Eye, just a normal piece of paper and a signature."

“Who says it’s just a normal piece of paper?” Jon counters, the contrarian in him bristling despite Daisy’s placid tone. “Maybe it’s touched by the Beholding, same as the Leitners–”

Daisy gives a lazy shrug. “Yeah, maybe, but you don’t *Know.”*

“We don’t know the mechanics of it all,” Georgie intercedes, giving Jon a stern *we-both-know-you’re-just-being-difficult-now* look. He scowls back, but says nothing. She’s far too well-versed in his various moods and defenses for him to argue the point. “But the no-quitting curse isn’t the only issue. Even if they have an out, we’d still be exposing any new hires to the Fears. If they’ve been lucky enough to make it this far in life without getting tangled up in this world, is it really okay to expose them to it?”

“We’d be pitting normal humans against Hunters, too.” Daisy gnaws at her lip as she considers the point, all prior certainty ebbing away. “Seems wrong, knowing how outmatched they’ll be.”

With a jerky shake of her head, Basira rejoins the conversation. “Unless we hire Hunters for the job.”

“Right, let’s just check the yellow pages,” Jon says, his hackles rising again. “Shall we look under ‘H’ for Hunters or ‘A’ for Avatars? Or maybe we should just add ‘marked by unfathomable cosmic evil’ as a requirement to the job listing?”

“Well, do you have any better suggestions?” Basira shoots back, equally scathing – and Jon instantly deflates.

“Sorry,” he mumbles, embarrassed.

It’s just that he’s *hungry – What else is new?* – and he has to hold out for at *least* a few more days yet before he can permit himself a statement. And he’s constantly on edge, just *waiting* for the next catastrophe; and although he should be acclimatized to it by now, the chronic

sense of being watched isn't helping his nerves; and the compounding stress is making him *ornery;* and… and…

And none of that is a good excuse for belligerence, Jon reminds himself.

"That was… unhelpful of me. Childish. Just…" He stares down at his hands, knuckles blanching as he clenches his fists more tightly in his lap. "Wish I could go *one day* without some ethical dilemma or another is all."

His attempt at a smile fizzles before it starts. With a sympathetic grimace, Martin reaches over to put his hand over one of Jon's. The snarl of anxiety sitting heavy in Jon's chest eases ever so slightly at the touch.

"Yeah." Mollified, Basira relaxes her posture. Perhaps more than she intended: the way her spine bows, she looks ready to crumple like a house of cards under a careless breath. "We don't have a lot of options. At least trained security will stand a better chance than the people working upstairs."

"If we have a heads up when they're going to attack, we could call in an anonymous tip?" Martin says. "Report a bomb threat or something. Get the building evacuated ahead of time, at least."

"Hmm." Georgie leans forward in her chair with one elbow resting on her knee, props her chin on her hand, and stares fixedly at the floor as she deliberates. "Are you able to keep tabs on them, Jon?"

"Not really. They're Hunters, and I'm not. When it comes to tracking, I'm at a distinct disadvantage. All the times they showed up before, they took me by surprise."

"Suppose we could ask Helen to keep an eye out," Basira says.

"You're joking."

"Yes, Jon, I'm joking." Basira sighs. "I don't know. Short of combing through old statements for potential candidates to solicit with job offers, or – or the Eye miraculously deciding to be generous and airdropping a shortlist of Hunters seeking steady employment into your head? I think our choices are either do nothing at all or hire security, offer them hazard pay, and hope they can hold their own."

"The Lukases are pretty connected," Martin says. "I can ask Peter if he knows anyone. He avoids being helpful on principle, but there's always a chance he won't want Julia and Trevor complicating things."

"Did Simon leave you his number?" Daisy flashes a none-too-innocent smirk. "He said something about a Hunter messing up his Ritual, right? Maybe they're still in touch."

"Oh, piss off," Martin says, but his warning glare is tempered by a poorly-suppressed, amused twist of the lips. Basira looks between the two of them with a bemused expression, as she so often did before she adapted to the easy, companionable banter between Jon and Daisy.

"Simon?" Georgie asks.

"Avatar of the Vast," Jon explains. "Likes to throw people off of high places. Even further past his expiration date than Jonah. Best avoided."

"Speaking of Jonah," Basira says, "the Hunters aren't the only ones we have to hold off until the solstice. We don't know what Jonah's next moves will be, or Peter's. And we have to locate the Panopticon still."

Jon looks to Daisy. "I take it you didn't see anything that looked like a map when you pillaged his office?"

"Nope," she says. "Mostly just paperwork and office supplies. The only interesting things apart from the Leitners were that stash of statements and some old bones."

Bones? Georgie mouths silently, but apparently thinks better of asking for elaboration.

“Didn’t have time for a thorough search, though,” Daisy continues. “Wasn’t sure how long Martin could keep Lukas distracted.”

“Jonah may not have even given him a map yet,” Jon says. “Seems like something he’d do, withholding it until the last possible moment.”

Martin tosses his head back with a dramatic sigh. “Which means we’re stuck navigating a labyrinth on our own.”

“It’s doable,” Basira declares. “The tunnels won’t be moving around, with that Leitner out of the picture.”

She casts Daisy a look of mild reproach. Although she grudgingly conceded earlier that burning the books was the right move, once Daisy and Martin made their case – and upon seeing both Jon and Georgie concur with the decision – Basira still wasn’t thrilled that they took it upon themselves to make that call without first consulting the rest of the group.

“And now there’s no way for the NotThem to escape,” Daisy says, unfazed. For her, that had been the most salient point of her argument: one less monster prowling through the world.

“So we’ll explore in pairs, lay line as we go, leave trail markers,” Basira says. “Six months is plenty of time to map the layout and find the right way.”

Six months is also *plenty of time for things to go wrong,* Jon doesn’t add.

But maybe Basira has a point. Compared to the routine minefield of ethical dilemmas and intractable catch-22s, a bit of orienteering might just be a surmountable obstacle.

As the summer months crawl by, Jonah Magnus once again finds himself beset by intolerable boredom.

And it *is* boredom fueling his tapping foot and drumming fingers. Not anxiety. Jonah does not *get* anxious; he does not *panic;* he's perfectly capable of maintaining his composure under pressure. Most of all, he excels at playing the long game.

Audio. Opperior. Vigilo.

It's more than just an institutional motto. It's a personal creed.

That does not make waiting an *enjoyable* experience, particularly when listening and watching continue to yield so little of interest. These days, the Archivist spends more time hiding away in the dilapidated tunnels of the former Millbank Prison than not, and he and the others continue to be gallingly tight-lipped whenever they are within Jonah's eyeshot. Given such a stagnant state of affairs, a certain amount of impatience is to be pardoned.

The most recent development of note – weeks past by now – was Jon and Basira's trek to Ny-Ålesund. Jonah kept a close eye on them throughout their journey, eagerly waiting for the Archivist to buckle under temptation when presented with easy prey. Despite some close calls, Jon's self-discipline held out. Unfortunate, but not overly surprising: Jonathan Sims has always had an obstinate streak.

More fortunately, Jon *also* happens to be an open book. The strain of resisting his instincts was starkly evident in his shaking limbs and staggering steps, in every near miss and guilty flinch. Any disappointment Jonah may have felt at his Archivist's stubborn restraint was attenuated by the amusement of watching that inner struggle play out in plain sight – and the knowledge of how *fruitless* that struggle ultimately is. Jon's own acute awareness of that futility makes it all the more amusing to behold.

The Hunters were an unanticipated source of entertainment. Jonah looked on as they stalked their prey, the Archivist and the Detective none the wiser. The Dark shrouded them all as

soon as they were within the limits its territory, of course. A shame, really. He would have liked to witness the confrontation unfold – *especially* since the aftermath was so perplexing.

For hours, Jon and Basira were undetectable. The only sign of change was an unknowable blip moving away from Ny-Ålesund and towards the mainland. When they finally reappeared on Jonah's radar, they were at Oslo Gardermoen Airport. Several more hours passed before the Hunters staggered out of the Eye's blind spot, furious and shaken, spitting threats and promises of retribution.

Whatever portable void had been concealing the Archivist and his companion began moving again shortly after dropping them off, heading southward for a stretch before becoming altogether imperceptible. One of the Dark's ilk, no doubt; some sort of aircraft, given its unswerving path. As for the circumstances surrounding it, Jonah could only speculate.

Any remnants of the People's Church would be hostile to affiliates of the Eye. Their first instinct would have been to kill trespassers, or else to capture and interrogate them. Barring that, they would simply ward them off. In the latter case, they certainly wouldn't have any incentive to *assist* their enemies in returning home. Ejecting them from the premises would have been sufficient.

Did Jon or Basira manage to extort the People's Church somehow? Adequate blackmail would have been difficult to come by, but hostage-taking is a distinct possibility. Jonah cannot See how many Church members remain, but likely no more than a handful at most. If Jon and Basira were outnumbered, it shouldn't have been by much.

Could Jon have *compelled* them? Possible, but forcing someone to follow through on such a sustained, complex command seems like it would be beyond Jon's current capabilities.

A negotiation, perhaps? But for what stakes? And on what common ground? It's difficult to conceive of an incentive enticing enough to secure the cooperation of Rayner's disciples – particularly if they assume Gertrude was instrumental in the failure of their Ritual.

It's altogether mystifying, but not *troubling* per se. Jon's existence has been dictated by terror for as long as he can remember. There's no reason to believe he could come into such close contact with one of the Entities without feeling fear enough to leave a mark – and that's what truly matters.

Only three marks remain now. The Lonely should be easy enough to orchestrate. The Slaughter and the Flesh are proving more difficult. (If Jared Hopworth's neutralization was vexing, Melanie's departure was downright *infuriating*.) Still, despite Jonah's eagerness – and, admittedly, *frustration* – there is no deadline. He can afford the time to search for alternatives. If playing the game from behind bars grows too irksome, well… Jonah is here by choice. He can leave whenever he wants.

Soon, perhaps. Not just yet. There are ways to remedy the standstill from a distance.

Which brings him to the present moment: sitting in a chair seemingly designed to be uncomfortable, receiver to his ear, listening to the faint electronic crackle of the connection, and turning recent events over in his mind as he waits for the other party to accept his call.

It takes a little over a minute before the static cuts out.

"What," comes a clipped voice.

Jonah's lip curls in a smile. "Skipping the pleasantries, are we, Detective?"

"Cut to the chase," Basira bites out, "or I'm hanging up."

"How was your trip?"

"What, you weren't *Watching* us?"

"Up to a point," Jonah says. "Close proximity to the Dark interferes with my Sight, I'm afraid. I take it you neutralized the threat?"

"Yes. Is that all?"

“I *am* curious as to how you managed to obtain the Church’s cooperation.” Silence. “I may not be able to See through the Dark, but I *can* perceive the outline of the cavity it carves in reality. I can only assume you were given an escort away from Svalbard.”

“I’m not giving you a play-by-play. We did what we set out to do. The People’s Church isn’t staging a Ritual anytime soon. Leave it at that.”

“How did you evade the Hunters?”

“Serendipity.” Judging from the snide edge to the word, Basira must still be seething about their last conversation. “Are we done here?”

“Not quite,” Jonah says serenely. “I have some information that may be of interest to you.”

“Is this another errand? Because I’m *really* not keen on carting Jon all over the continent on a whim–”

“This is more of a personal matter.”

Basira scoffs. “I’m not doing you a *favor*.”

“Not for *me,* Detective. It involves your partner.” Another beat of silence. “I take it I have your curiosity.”

“Get to the point.”

“I’ve noticed a trend in your studies lately. Scouring the Archives, ransacking the library, chasing down any scant lead that presents itself… you’re starting to fear that you’ve exhausted every avenue of research, aren’t you?”

“Your *point?”* Basira says through gritted teeth.

“What if I told you that you were on the right track?” That landed solidly, if Basira’s sharp intake of breath is any indication. “Tell me, Detective: what have you learned of the Wild Hunt?”

It starts with an itch: a prickling, dry heat blossoming in his fingertips and spreading out like ink bleeding through waterlogged paper. By the time it reaches halfway up his forearms, it’s a consumptive burn, sizzling in the deep tissue. As it sears its way to the surface, the outer layer of skin begins to scald, to melt, to writhe and bubble like liquid brought to a boil. The pain is exquisite, calling to mind corrosive chemical burns, hot wax smothering and fusing with fragile skin, glowing coals layered atop every square inch of him–

As the pain reaches a crescendo, the roiling blisters rupture one by one to reveal the bone-deep infestation of eyes, clustering like metastatic tumors just under the skin. Riveted to the spot, unable to move a muscle, and forbidden to look away, the Archivist simply watches as the change devours him whole.

The restless swarm stares back. He Sees it Seeing him Seeing it, and the recursive, uncanny horror of the sight is dulled by an utter lack of surprise.

Countless though his eyes may be, he can neither see nor See what pinions him. The tactile impressions flicker from one to the next in a rapid flurry: cruel, unyielding hands pressing bruises into his skin; spider silk trussing him up and pinning his arms to his side; familiar, dreamlike static spreading its paralysis through his veins–

“This place is just full of monsters,” drawls a familiar voice.

Every curious, eager eye pivots to look – the only motion allowed him. Otherwise immobilized, the Archivist can only look on as the Hunters close in: one advancing from the front, the other from behind.

"Genuinely thought you were different, but you're just another monster." A menacing chuckle; hot breath ghosting over the shell of his ear. "Not even worth the chase."

The long-healed scar on the Archivist's throat splits along its seam to expose another livid eye, swiveling frantically in its gouged-out socket. It does not blink when the keen edge of a blade draws near to rest flush against the vulnerable cornea. And when the knife presses down–

"–it wasn't a deep cut or a long one but apparently it was enough–"

–it pops like a bloated abscess. To the horror of Hunter and Archivist alike, what surges forth through the puncture is not aqueous humor.

"…whole body began to shudder as tiny shapes began to stream out of the wound," *the Archive narrates with detached fascination.* "Spiders. Thousands and thousands of spiders – tens of thousands of skittering legs and evil little eyes–"

–cascading down his neck, scuttling across his skin in seething rivulets, burrowing out through the other side to amass in his throat–

"–the dark shapes pooled around her feet and spread out in a twitching circle – scurried off into the shadows and crevices – body was completely hollow, save for a few cobwebs–"

–and eyes*, of course. He's* all *eyes, now, the last narrow span of scarred skin fissuring to reveal yet one more bulging, lurking Watcher. A single spider, the last remnant of the horde, clambers over his lower lip and creeps upward to perch on an unrecognizable, inhuman face.*

As the Hunters turn tail and flee, the Watcher's throne shifts to mold itself around the Archivist's ravaged, undying body, rooting the Archive in its fated place. In a crumbling tower at the center of creation, a monstrous triumvirate beholds the long-drawn-out death throes of a desiccated world. The Archive does not blink, the Archivist does not sleep, and the tattered remnants of the long-nameless human confined within languish in Promethean limbo.

Shackled at the cusp of drowning, drawn out for the Spider in the corner of every eye, the shattered mind formerly known as [illegible] howls in voiceless torment–

"–up, wake *up–"*

Martin flinches back, narrowly evading one flailing arm.

"Come on, Jon," he pleads, wringing his hands to stop him from touching.

Every instinct is urging him to reach out, to gather Jon into his lap, to hold him while he sobs and thrashes his way into waking. More often than not, the pressure soothes. But Martin can only guess at the content of the nightmare, and if Jon is lost in the Buried right now, restricting his movement in any way will only make things worse. Martin learned that the hard way.

Another full minute of struggling passes before Jon finally goes limp and trembling, and another before he opens his eyes.

"There you are," Martin says, shaky with relief. *Or maybe not,* he thinks upon seeing Jon's vacant stare. "Jon?"

"Martin…?" Jon replies in a raspy whisper. It only takes a few seconds for disorientation to shatter into stunned disbelief, his eyes widening and his mouth going slack. "What – *how?* Y-you – you – you–"

He covers his mouth, tears pooling in his eyes as he visibly struggles to swallow. Cliché as it is, the expression on his face is a textbook illustration of actively seeing a ghost.

Post-apocalypse, then, Martin thinks grimly. Of all the horrific twists and turns Jon's nightmares can take, these tend to be the worst of the lot.

The dreams he shares with statement givers don't inspire *fear* these days so much as overpowering guilt. The one exception seems to be Karolina: Jon still regularly awakens from those encounters gasping for air, clawing at the sheets, and liable to react to the lightest touch with terrified, nigh-violent resistance. That particular nightmare tends to follow a consistent script, though, which means that Martin can reliably predict Jon's responses and mitigate that post-waking panic.

Luckily, the other dreamscapes are tame by comparison. Nightmare imagery is relegated to background, dampened by the lucidity of the dream's occupants. *Un*luckily, that lucidity also precludes *restful* sleep. Jon rarely awakens feeling like he's actually slept.

But even when all of the statement givers are awake, the Eye isn't content to allow its Archivist dreamless rest. If no victim is available to provide their memories as a stage, Jon is thrown to the mercy of his *own* nightmares. Not only do they tend to linger longer after chasing him into wakefulness, they're also typically a novel, Frankensteinian mashup of multiple Fears – and when Jon can't articulate those details, it's all the more difficult to know how best to help.

Jon reaches out with both hands – and then stops short just before making contact, as if Martin might disperse like smoke at the slightest touch.

"H-*how*…?"

"I'm here," Martin says. Jon's gaze darts around the area, unfocused and uncomprehending. "We're safe here. Whatever you were seeing before–"

At that, terror-laced cognizance dawns on Jon's face.

"Hunters," he gasps. "Trevor, he – they – they – *spiders*–" He begins feverishly brushing himself off, patting himself down, scratching at his skin with brutal abandon. "In me, and – and – and outside – *everywhere–"*

“Hey, you’re okay–” Martin grabs both of Jon’s wrists before he can start properly clawing at his throat. “You’re okay! You’re safe.”

“So *many*,” Jon rambles on. “They – *everywhere,* but – could be *anywhere* now, lost sight of them – all but one, just – just *there.*” He glances to his left, then to his right, searching the empty air with misty, dilated eyes. “Always – always *was* there – corner of my eye, just – and I knew, I *knew,* but I didn’t – I didn’t *want* to–”

“Shh, shh,” Martin coaxes, struggling to keep his voice steady in the face of Jon’s mounting distress. Abruptly, Jon stops trying to yank his hands away from Martin’s grip and starts pushing back instead, stretching his fingers out to grasp for a handhold. The instant Martin releases him, Jon lunges forward to clamber into Martin’s lap. Martin lets him, pulling him in and rocking gently. “You were just dreaming, Jon. None of it was real, I promise.”

“No, they – they – and *I*…” Jon’s forehead wrinkles as he turns the statement over in his mind. “Dreaming…?”

“Just a dream,” Martin reiterates. This time, it seems to sink in: Jon goes lax all at once as fatigue supplants terror.

“Martin?” he says hoarsely.

“Right here, Jon.”

“Am I…” Jon scrunches his face up, struggling for clarity. “Am I still – *me?”*

“Y-yeah, of course. Why wouldn’t you be?”

“Never the right number of eyes,” Jon says absently, taking a sudden and intense interest in the backs of his hands. “Or – or maybe it is. I guess it – it depends on who you ask, doesn’t

it?" Scowling, he scratches halfheartedly at the crook of one elbow. "But if you ask me – *this* me – *I* don't like them there."

"What?"

"Beholding's punishing me," Jon says, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world. He stretches his forearms out, exposing the undersides for Martin to examine. "See?"

No doubt Jon is still swimming in the twilight haze between dreams and waking, but he sounds so *lucid* all of a sudden. So, Martin does his due diligence and dips his head down to scrutinize Jon's arms. There are inflamed welts – rapidly fading now that he's stopped scratching – layered atop a familiar constellation of circular scars, but nothing that matches up with Jon's odd ramblings.

"Jon," Martin says gently, "I don't know what you're trying to show me, but I don't see anything out of the ordinary. Just you."

Instead of responding to that reassurance, Jon simply carries on his previous train of thought with absolute conviction.

"It's angry," he says, matter-of-fact. "Because I've put it on a restriction diet. It thinks that if it makes me *look* enough like a monster, more people will treat me like one, and then I'll start acting more like one. Do what I'm meant for. Like I used to."

The bulk of his attention is laser-focused on his arms now. He seems fixated on his left wrist in particular, methodically digging his nails into the skin as he tries to excavate something only he can see.

Martin covers the spot with his own hand before Jon can draw blood. Jon casts Martin an indignant glare, but before he can voice a protest, his expression goes blank, as if he's entirely lost his train of thought. Probably has, based on the way he slowly scans the room like he's just now seeing it for the first time.

“I…” Jon’s eyelids begin to flutter shut, heavy with exhaustion. “Martin?”

“Right here.” Martin pulls Jon close, petting his hair. Predictably, Jon curls his fingers in Martin's jumper, bunching the fabric in his fists. “I’ve got you; you’re safe.”

“I’m *tired*,” Jon mumbles. From the way his voice cracks on the word, Martin knows it’s not just drowsiness he means.

“I know. Go back to sleep, okay?”

Having turned his face to nuzzle into Martin’s chest, Jon’s next words are too muffled to make out. Then he slumps forward, releasing his death grip on Martin’s jumper. Martin leans back against the tunnel wall – arms wrapped protectively around Jon, chin resting on the crown of Jon’s head – and tries to fight back frustrated, impotent tears.

(It’s an exercise in futility. Martin has always been a sympathetic crier when it comes to the people he cares for most. He settles for trying to cry *quietly.*)

By the time Daisy makes an appearance a half-hour later, Martin has gotten it out of his system. Mostly. Regrettably, the reddened, puffy eyes give him away.

“You, uh… everything okay?”

“Fine,” Martin croaks. Daisy raises her eyebrows. “Nightmares,” he adds, glancing down at Jon – and reflexively hugging him closer. “Again.”

“What about this time?”

“The Web, I think. And Hunters.”

Daisy flinches almost imperceptibly at that.

"Why's he sleeping in the middle of the day?" she asks. "What, did he just nod off down here?"

"Tessa has a work deadline coming up. Told Jon she needs uninterrupted sleep if she wants any hope of focusing during the day, so they worked out a schedule so their dreams don't overlap."

Martin can't quite conceal the bitterness in his tone. *It's a perfectly reasonable request,* Jon had told him, *seeing as it's my fault her sleep is so restless in the first place* – but it still chafes, how readily Jon casts aside his own welfare.

Wordlessly, Daisy takes a seat on the ground a few feet away and waits.

"I just…" Martin draws in a sniffling breath. He clears his throat, wincing at the dull ache lodged there. "I wish I could *help*, you know?"

"You already do."

"Not enough," Martin scoffs. His eyes are stinging again.

"More than you think. If he wakes up scared and you're not around, he doesn't usually fall back asleep. Doesn't even try. He only does that for you."

It's not just the sleep, Martin doesn't say. Daisy knows. She's slipping down a similar slope herself – a far steeper one, compared to Jon's more gradual, weaving crawl.

Martin may be a chronic mother hen, more attentive to Jon's wellbeing than Jon himself is, but Daisy has a more intimate understanding of what it's like to be dependent on an Entity. Sure, under the right (wrong?) circumstances, Martin may have been a candidate for

Avatarhood himself one day. It would be foolish to deny that the Lonely still has a claim on him. But his path diverged before he could reach that point of no return – and he hates, he *hates* that Daisy and Jon refer to it like that, but everything they know about the Fears supports such an assumption.

Martin's distaste for fatalism aside, it's hard to argue the point when the evidence is so stark, so *bleak.* Loose-fitting clothes might conceal prominent ribs and gaunt frames to some extent, but some side effects are more difficult to hide: chronic fatigue, mood swings, memory lapses, thousand-yard stares, and trancelike episodes full of hungry mutterings.

Most obvious to Martin, ever the caretaker, is the near-complete loss of appetite. With enough cajoling, Jon will at least try to eat what Martin brings him, but the longer he goes without a statement, the more his body rebels. The sights and smells of even his favorite foods bring on waves of nausea; everything tastes rotten or spoiled on his tongue; and even when he *can* manage to choke down a meal, he can't actually *keep* it down. That revelation had at least answered Martin's question as to how metaphysical malnutrition could manifest as *physical* weight loss.

"It's not *fair*." It's an understatement – and the warble in his voice makes him sound childish – but that doesn't make it any less true.

"No," Daisy says. "It isn't."

Martin doesn't trust himself to speak without falling apart again. Instead, he takes a shaky breath and shuts his eyes. For a few minutes, neither of them speak.

There was a time in Martin's life when such lulls in conversation were painfully awkward. Alienating even, carrying with them an unshakeable impression of being alone despite the close proximity of another. When the discomfort grew unbearable, so too would the urge to fill that silence: with nervous chatter, with foot-in-mouth comments, with botched and bumbling attempts to render unasked-for assistance, with asinine observations about the weather – *anything* to feel connected to the world around him. To make himself present in the minds of others, if only fleetingly.

Rather than breaking the ice, he put people off; instead of ingratiating himself, he grated on nerves. It was no wonder people found him so insufferable, he thought; no wonder why his

own mother considered him a pest. Yet the habit persisted, no matter how consistently it backfired.

For better or worse, the past few years have changed him. Being alone in the presence of others became… not *enjoyable,* per se, but acceptable. Normal and natural enough to dull the distress he had once felt so keenly. Although his efforts to break away from the Lonely have reawakened some of that old discomfort, he finds that he can tolerate it better than before.

There's nuance in silences, and as it turns out, not all silence is bad. He's learned to appreciate quiet company, to find companionship in a room where everyone is preoccupied with their own solitary pursuits. His time spent with Daisy is typically characterized by such comfortable independent-togetherness.

That said, she does have a penchant for breaking silences in the most jarring of ways.

"They'll never stop hunting him," she announces.

"What?"

"Julia. Trevor." Daisy stares down at her lap, picking at a loose thread on the tattered knee of her trousers. "They've got him in their crosshairs. They'll keep chasing him until they run him down."

"You had a change of heart."

"Yeah, and that took eight months in hell, completely cut off from the Hunt, with nothing to do except think about how I'd ended up there, and – and Jon risking *everything* just to drag me out. *Me,* after what I–" Daisy curls in on herself, shoulders hiked up and arms pulled tight to her middle with each hand gripping the opposite elbow. Martin can see the divots where her blunt nails dig into the skin. "Unless you want to bury them alive for a timeout, send Jon in after them, and *hope* they grow a guilty conscience somewhere along the way? I don't know how you'd change their mindset. Especially since… well, they each have another Hunter as an anchor."

“Meaning they might skip over the self-reflection entirely and just look to each other for reassurance.”

Daisy gives a jerky nod. “Justify every kill they’ve made together and come out of the experience with even more conviction than they had going in.”

“You think so?”

“Mm. Echo chambers are… well. There’s a lot you can rationalize to yourself if you know your peers will help you hide the bodies.” Daisy avoids eye contact, staring intently at the opposite wall. Martin waits. She seems to be working up to something – parting her lips to speak before pressing them tightly together again, deliberating for well over a minute before she finally blurts out: “Avatars are hard to kill, but some of the statements imply that a Hunter can do the trick.”

“Do you… are you trying to say you think they could actually kill him?” Once again, Martin automatically tightens his grip on Jon, who makes a soft, disgruntled noise in his throat at being jostled, then shoves his face into Martin’s chest and sags forward again with a put-upon sigh.

“No, I – well, I mean, maybe? I don’t really know. That’s a question for Jon.” Daisy shakes her head. “But that wasn’t what I was trying to get at.”

“Okay…?”

“I just meant… I might not be a Hunter right now,” she says slowly, “but it’s still there. I could–”

Martin feels his entire body tense. “No.”

“But–”

“If you go Hunting, you might not come back.”

“But what if it’s worth it?” Daisy snaps. “I mean, look at me.”

Martin doesn’t have to. He knows what sick looks like.

Daisy isn’t quite skeletal, but she’s on her way there: taut, pallid skin stretched thin over protruding bones, brought into starker relief by the muscle tension and rigid posture characteristic of chronic pain. Jagged edges that once called to mind images of fangs and talons and sharpened knives are now more reminiscent of shattered glass and splinters. The bags under her eyes are dark enough to rival the vibrant bruises on her forearms – a souvenir of one of her recent falls, increasing in frequency and severity as her dizzy spells flourish into episodes of outright syncope.

When Martin’s mother got this bad, it had only been a matter of time before bumps and bruises progressed to broken bones.

“How much longer do I really have?” Daisy chokes on a harsh laugh. “It’s going to kill me either way. I’m useless as I am now. But I can – if I could track them, if I could *stop* them before they–” She falters, breathing heavily through her nose for a few seconds. “Maybe I could do some *good* for once. I owe that much.”

“And then what? After you take down the Hunters, what then? The chase doesn’t end there.” Once, Martin would have found Daisy’s glower intimidating. Now, all he sees is violence turned inward, an implosion in slow motion. “How do you think that would make Jon feel, you going back to the Hunt on his behalf? He’s got enough guilt as it is.”

“I–”

“And what about Basira?” Daisy snaps her mouth shut at that, redirecting her baleful glare at the far wall. “You’d be leaving her alone. Or worse – where Jon’s from, she was left with the responsibility of stopping you – of *killing* someone she loves. How is someone supposed to *recover* from something like that?” Martin takes a breath. “Look, we’ll figure out how to deal with the threat, but this… this isn’t the way.”

Daisy says nothing. Martin watches as she scratches at her cheek, pinches her bottom lip, and, after a prolonged minute of pointed silence, nods stiffly.

“Okay,” she says.

Then she fishes her phone out of her pocket, pulls up an episode of *The Archers,* and wordlessly offers an earbud to Martin, all while refusing to look him in the eye.

“You gave him your *cell number?”* Martin says incredulously – and a bit too closely to Jon’s ear, too loud and sudden a stimulus so soon after being unceremoniously jolted into waking. “Sorry,” Martin automatically says in response to Jon’s grunt of protest, threading his fingers through Jon’s hair in apology. A hazy warmth blooms in Jon’s chest at the gesture, and he doesn’t think twice before leaning shamelessly into the touch.

“No,” Basira says. “I didn’t.”

“Then–” Martin pauses, then sighs. “Ah. Right.”

“Yeah,” Basira huffs. “Why call the office landline when he can flaunt his supernatural doxxing hobby?”

“What–” Voice still rough with sleep, Jon clears his throat. He should probably get off the floor for this conversation, but he’s comfortable where he is, slouched against Martin’s side. “What did he want?”

“He had information. About the Hunt.”

That’s enough to drag Jon fully into waking, grogginess subsumed by a wave of dread. “Julia and Trevor?”

“No.” Basira’s eyes drift to Daisy. “I might have a lead.”

“I thought you were done following up on his ‘leads,’” Daisy says tonelessly.

“This one might be worth checking out.”

“Come on, you *know* he’s just jerking you around.”

Basira flinches minutely, hurt momentarily crossing her face, before her eyes narrow and her fists clench at her sides. When she opens her mouth to retort, Martin intervenes.

“What exactly did he tell you?” he asks. Daisy scowls at him. “I mean, we should at least discuss it, right?”

“I’ve been researching the Hunt ever since you got back from the Buried,” Basira says, her eyes still fixed on Daisy. “Before then, even – from the day after Jon woke up and started talking about the future. I’ve combed through hundreds of statements since then, looking for some instance where someone escaped the Hunt. Something that might indicate how an anchor might work in this situation.”

“You didn’t have much luck,” Jon says. None of them did last time, either.

“No. I even went through Artefact Storage’s records, looking for hints of something that could stave off, or – or interfere with the Hunt. Nothing. As far as I could tell, anyway,” she

mutters, her mouth twisting in a sour grimace. “There’s not much detailed documentation given for most of their inventory.”

“Anyone who survives working there for any significant length of time learns to interact with the artefacts as little as possible,” Jon says. “They’ll try to research an object’s history and provenance, but they tend to refrain from experimentation.”

“Sonja used to complain that Elias was always getting on her case about how this is a *research* institute, not a containment facility,” Martin says, smiling to himself. “Good thing she’s so anti-authoritarian.”

Although Jon didn’t often interact with coworkers outside of his department, Sonja’s thoughtful management style was common knowledge. She cares far more for the *people* in her care than the artefacts, and acts accordingly. Exposing her staff to unnecessary danger just for the sake of grasping at dregs of esoteric knowledge would be anathema to her.

Rightly so, Jon thinks, his chest tightening as old, long-festering guilt bubbles to the surface.

“You’re probably right,” Basira concedes. “Didn’t make it any less frustrating. But just because the Institute hasn’t encountered something doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. People have been passing down stories for as long as we’ve had language. Statements aren’t the only source to look to.”

“Is that why you’ve been hoarding half the library?” Martin asks. “Speaking of which, Diana emailed me – said you’ve been dodging her messages? There’s an anthropology student doing research on the werewolf mythos and apparently you’ve pillaged nearly every book on the subject.”

“I’ll return some of them tonight,” Basira says dismissively. “I think I’ve narrowed down what I need anyway.”

“Which is?” Martin asks.

“The Wild Hunt. A folklore motif,” Basira explains before Martin can repeat the question. “Sightings of supernatural hunting parties – ghosts, faeries, elves, demons, whatever. It dates back to pre-Christian Europe, though there are variations of it in other parts of the world.”

“The leader of the hunt varies by region and tradition,” Jon chimes in, sitting up and leaning forward. “Sometimes legendary heroes, like Odin in Germanic paganism, Gwyn ap Nudd in Welsh tradition, Fionn mac Cumhaill in Ireland, King Arthur in France – and sometimes historical figures – kings like Theodoric the Great, rebels like Eadric the Wild, *several* different hated nobles and local pariahs–”

“I thought the Eye was quieter down here,” Basira says.

“Oh, uh. I… already knew all of that. Shakespeare incorporated it into *The Merry Wives of Windsor,* you know – Herne the Hunter, in his version. I was curious about its origins, and one thing led to another…” Jon coughs lightly. “I used to go on a lot of research binges in uni.”

“Used to?” Martin repeats with a wry grin. Jon huffs and bumps their shoulders together.

“Well, anyway,” Basira says, “the Wild Hunt is a recurring trope. The common thread is an endless pursuit, often with unwilling participants.”

“And you think they’re not just stories,” Daisy says.

Basira shrugs. “Folklore hits a bit different once you learn monsters are real.”

“Did Magnus give you any actual leads, or did he just give you reading recommendations?” Daisy’s crossed arms and tight expression belie her neutral tone.

“It seems most Leitners are original titles,” Basira says, “but some are just… anomalous reproductions of historical works. Like Leitner’s copy of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture,* or that Corruption statement about *The Tale of a Field Hospital.”*

“Case number 0030306,” Jon supplies. “Statement of Joseph Russo regarding a book allegedly authored by Sir Frederick Treeves. Russo cut himself on one of the pages and was later found dead of rapid-onset putrefaction and blood poisoning.”

“Yeah. Stands to reason those aren’t the only instances of evil books that disguise themselves as more well-known writings. There’s this one medieval Latin text…” Basira refers to her notebook, resting on the table. She’ll need to start on a new one, soon: nearly every page is covered edge-to-edge in color-coded, tightly-packed, encrypted text. *“De nugis curialium,”* she says, tentative in her pronunciation.

“Of the trifles of courtiers,” Jon translates.

“Or *Trinkets for the Court,* yeah.” Basira raises an eyebrow. “You’ve heard of it?”

“No,” Jon says with a humorless laugh. “And I’m not fluent in Latin, either. The Eye sees fit to turn its Archivists into universal translators without so much as a memo.”

“Another convenience feature?” Daisy’s tone is mild, wary of teasing until she gauges Jon’s mood.

“Probably the least menacing of the lot,” Jon replies with a small smile.

“Too bad you’re stuck working here, then,” Daisy says, more confidently now. “I can see you making a career in some other dusty basement, doing linguistics research for an academic institution that *isn’t* a front for cosmic evil forces.”

“What, deciphering Linear A? Solving the mystery of the Voynich manuscript?”

“You could make a name for yourself.”

“In an incredibly niche corner of academia,” Jon says drily.

“Why not?” Daisy smirks. “You’ve already nailed the eccentric professor aesthetic. Or – used to, anyway. Pretty sure half your wardrobe now is Georgie’s merch, and the other half is jumpers you stole from Martin.”

Jon grins as Martin’s face turns a rather lovely shade of pink.

“Anyway,” Basira says, “the author was a courtier, so most of the work is court gossip, apocryphal anecdotes, and satire. Magnus says there are records of a Leitner based on it. More than one, actually – none of them are a reproduction of the work in its entirety, but rather cherry-picked sections with similar thematic elements, curated and bound together in smaller volumes.”

“Let me guess,” Martin sighs. “The themes match up with Smirke’s taxonomy.”

“Probably, though I don’t know how many volumes there are, or how many of the Fears are represented in the collection. According to Magnus, at least one of them belongs to the Hunt – *Of King Herla.* Magnus *claims* he doesn’t know the exact contents, whether it’s a verbatim reproduction of the source material or includes text not found in the original, like the copy of *Tale of a Field Hospital* that Russo found. But the original work does contain two different accounts of the legend of Herla. Comparative mythologists consider it to be an example of the Wild Hunt motif.”

“Wait,” Daisy says, her earlier good humor evaporating in an instant. “You aren’t suggesting we hunt the thing down to *read* it, are you?”

“Not… necessarily,” Basira says. “But it could be useful.”

“It’s a *Leitner,”* Daisy says tersely. A muscle in Basira’s jaw tics. “Since when has one of those books ever helped with anything?”

“Did Jonah say what properties the book has?” Jon asks.

Daisy darts a sharp, disapproving glare in his direction. *“Jon.*”

“Supposedly it depends on how much of it you read,” Basira answers, ignoring the interruption.

“Like *A Disappearance,*” Martin says quietly.

“Yeah.”

Daisy gapes at each of them in turn. “I thought we decided *not* to mess around with these things.”

“We didn’t decide anything,” Basira says, a hard edge to the words.

Sensing that this is a battle she won’t win, Daisy turns to Jon. “And you? You’re on board with this?”

Jon hesitates. *Ideally*, he’s in staunch support of continuing Gerry’s crusade to wipe every last tome sporting one of Leitner’s bookplates from the face of the earth. But between Daisy's escalating deterioration, the memory of what she could become, and the beseeching desperation in Basira's eyes…

“I… think it might be worth looking into, at least,” he says, not without reticence.

“Haven’t we learned *anything?* Some leads aren’t worth chasing.” What starts out as a stressed, incredulous laugh dissolves into a growl in Daisy’s throat. “And some things can’t be tamed.”

Once again, Basira disregards Daisy's protests.

"Magnus was cagey about the details, of course," she says, her hands clenching briefly, "but he said Pu Songling Research Centre should have records that could point me in the right direction."

"Because he wants you to go there yourself," Daisy says.

"Seems like it."

"He's lying," Daisy says, tipping her head back with an exasperated sigh. "He's sending you on a wild goose chase to get you out of the way, just like he tried to do when he wanted Jon to follow me into the Coffin. Which means he's up to something."

"Yes, *obviously* he's up to something," Basira says tightly, glaring off to the side. Her balled fists are shaking now. "He doesn't even bother pretending he has no ulterior motives."

"So *why* are you letting him–"

"Because I'm not going to just *sit* here and watch you *die!"* Basira erupts, flinging one arm outward and leveling Daisy with a furious glower. Then she looks away again, shoulders drooping and hands falling limp at her sides. "If there's even a *chance* he's not lying, I…"

"Basira…" Daisy reaches out with a trembling hand, but stops short of touching until Basira meets her halfway.

"I can't *not* follow up," Basira says, holding Daisy's hand in a tight grip. "I need to know for sure."

"I agree," Jon says. Daisy shoots him another betrayed look, but there's less intensity to it now. "None of this sounds outside the realm of possibility. Jonah frequently couches things in

grains of truth, to make the deceit more believable. He's likely not giving us the whole story, but that doesn't mean there's nothing to find."

"But–"

"I'll get in touch with Pu Songling," Jon says, placating. "See if they can't send us what we need without any of us having to travel."

"And if they can't?" Martin asks.

Basira squares her shoulders, drawing herself up to her full height.

"Then I go there in person," she says.

The declaration leaves no room for argument.

Chapter End Notes

Basira, slamming the collected works of Jacob Grimm down onto the table: HERE'S HOW THE ARCHIVES SQUAD CAN STILL WIN

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- So obviously this chapter turned out to be more strategy meeting, catch up, and setup than plot, but based on my current outline, we'll have things Actually Happening again next chapter. (This chapter was getting long enough that I decided to cut it off here and move onto the next.)

- There were actually a few different folklore-inspired avenues I was considering to deal with Daisy's whole situation, but this is the one I ended up settling on. I'll be going into some more details about the Wild Hunt in future chapters, but I'm gonna try to keep my in-text infodumping to a reasonable level. (Admittedly, I do indulge in infodumping to a degree that most writing advice categorizes as a Don't, but I'm sort of... taking advantage of the fact that both Jon and Basira are the types of characters to infodump, lmao.) But if

anyone has any questions about it that I don't cover in-text, (or just wants to enthuse about folklore studies in general,) feel free to yell at me in the comments.

- Trevor's dialogue in Jon's nightmare is from MAG 153. The Archive-speak is all from Trevor's statement in MAG 056.

- Will be getting around to replying to comments from last chapter over the next few days, hopefully.

- As always, thank you for reading! <3

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

Anniversary

Chapter Summary

Basira moves forward with her plans to help Daisy; Jon grapples with an upcoming anniversary.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings for Chapter 29: discussion of Jon's & Daisy's restrictive diets & associated physical/mental deterioration (and potential parallels with disordered eating etc.); arguing & relationship disputes (that are not immediately resolved in-chapter); self-harm (burning oneself with a lit cigarette); cigarette smoking; swearing; discussion of suicidal ideation; panic & anxiety symptoms; discussions of grief & loss; cyclical mental health issues (post-traumatic anniversary reactions; related self-loathing, internalized victim blaming, & survivor's guilt; generally speaking, Jon's relapsing into self-isolating, worse-than-usual headspace, esp towards the end of the chapter); depictions of parental neglect/rejection/emotional abuse (Martin's mother).
There's also a Hunt-themed statement that contains descriptions of indiscriminate violence & unprovoked warfare against a civilian population.
Oh, and a cliffhanger.

Let me know if I missed anything!

Also, this chapter uses a work skin to format a certain part. If you have creators styles turned off, it might look a bit wonky.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Statement ends," Jon says, somewhat breathless as he fumbles to stop the recording.

"You alright?" Daisy asks.

"Fine." The word is punctuated by a click and a whir as the recorder resumes spooling.

"Are you, though?"

“Yes.” Scowling, Jon jabs his finger at the stop button – only for it to keep recording.

“It’s the Hunt, isn’t it.” Daisy sighs, rubbing the back of her neck. “Sorry it’s been so prominent for the last few. I’m… not quite scraping the bottom of the barrel yet, but–”

“It’s fine, Daisy.”

“Still, I–”

“I said it’s *fine–!”* Jon winces at his sharp tone. “I’m sorry, that was… I’m just – on edge, I suppose.”

Which is an understatement, really.

Because it’s September. It’s September, and after September is October, and October is–

Well. These days, he can’t look at a calendar – can’t even look at the time and date on his phone – without icy dread coursing through his veins.

Sporadic flashbacks have become an everyday occurrence, set off by the smallest of stimuli: a dropped glass shattering on the breakroom floor becomes a window bursting inward into shards; a thunderstorm heralds a fissuring sky, marred by hundreds upon thousands of greedy, unblinking voyeurs; his own voice is a doomsday harbinger, a key crammed into a lock he can’t keep from unbolting. The memories are too immediate, too vivid to feel past-tense.

It’s to be expected. Research, anecdote, and common sense all point to the impact of anniversaries on mental health. He knows what a textbook post-traumatic stress response looks like. Monster or not, in this particular sense he remains overwhelmingly human. No matter how much he rationalizes it, though, intellectually understanding a psychological phenomenon does little to soften the lived experience of it.

And it does nothing to temper the chilling knowledge – bordering on *conviction* – that it may happen again.

"Would be worrisome if you weren't stressed out, considering… you know. Everything." Daisy leans back in her chair, stretches her legs out in front of her, and rolls her shoulders. "Speaking of the Hunt. Any new developments?"

"I mean… nothing since yesterday? Everything I know, Basira knows."

Daisy stiffens slightly and looks off to the side. "Basira… isn't keeping me updated."

"Ah," Jon says, with tact to spare. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize."

"It's fine."

"Is it?"

Daisy sighs. "She thinks that I think she's wasting her time."

"And do you?"

Daisy gives a jerky shrug. "Don't you?"

"Not… necessarily," Jon hedges. Truthfully, his answer to that question is as mercurial as his moods these days, shifting from hour to hour, sometimes minute to minute. Daisy gives him an unimpressed look. "I won't lie and say I'm *optimistic,* but that doesn't mean it's not worth trying."

“You sound like Martin.”

“Well, he spent ample time drilling it into me,” Jon says with a wry smile. “I don’t have the same capacity for hope as he does, but improbable doesn’t mean impossible. If I’d had it my way, I’d have lain down and died ages ago. I’m only here now because of him.”

“Mental health check,” Daisy says automatically.

“Not thinking of hurting myself,” Jon replies, just as rote. “You don’t have to do that, you know. I’ve told you, I’m physically incapable of killing myself even if I wanted to.”

“That doesn’t stop you brooding.”

“Anyway, I wasn’t referring to anything recent.”

“Weren’t you, though?” At his blank look, Daisy gives an impatient sigh. “It hasn’t even been a year since you woke up, Sims. Up until six months ago, you were wandering an apocalyptic wasteland–”

“…I found myself utterly alone. Facing down a room full of nothing eyes, willing myself to take action. I never did, though–”

“–I wanted to act, to help, to do something, but – my mind had all but seized up, and I felt helpless to do anything but watch as events progressed–”

“–there was nothing I could do to save him – he died – so did any hope I had of – doing good in the world–”

“–there’s a sort of numbness that you adopt after months or years of bombing–”

“–I did spend a lot of time just… slumped in despair – had no reason to think it would help, but I could see no choice but waiting for death–”

“–hoping against hope that – it wouldn’t be forever–”

“Hey!” Daisy’s voice finally breaks through the rush of static. Or perhaps it was the pressure: Jon looks down to see her bony fingers caging his own in a bruising grip.

“Sorry,” he says, catching himself as he starts to list woozily.

“Not to say ‘I told you so,’ but…” Daisy gives his hands another squeeze. “You sort of just proved my point there.”

“I’m well aware that I’m – traumatized, or whatever–”

“Not *‘or whatever’*–”

“–but I’m not a danger to myself, so could we please just *move on?”* Jon mumbles, averting his eyes. “You wanted a Hunt update.”

Daisy scrutinizes him for a long moment before she allows the conversational pivot to stand, releasing her grip on his hands.

“Basira said you’ve heard back from that Head Librarian,” she says, “but she blew me off when I started prying.”

“Zhang Xiaoling,” Jon says, his shoulders relaxing. “She was able to confirm some of Jonah’s intel. They do have a statement about a book matching that description in their records, and she agreed to forward a copy once it’s been digitized. They’re further along in their digitization process than we are–”

Daisy snorts. “Probably because they’re actually working on it.”

“That, and they have the benefit of a Head Librarian who actually has a background in archival studies,” Jon says drily. “In any case, they have a large archive, so it’s a work in

progress. She's processed our inquiry, though, and she says she has someone on it. We should hear back by tomorrow at the latest."

"Huh," Daisy says. "Sounds…"

"Like a functioning archive?"

"I was going to say 'streamlined,' but sure."

"The wonders of a hiring process that prioritizes job qualifications as opposed to a candidate's apocalyptic potential."

"What are the chances their institution is also led by a centuries-old corpse with a god complex?"

"Non-zero, I imagine."

Daisy wrinkles her nose. "Ugh, don't say that."

"If it makes you feel any better, I don't have evidence one way or the other."

"It doesn't. Does she know about…" Daisy waves her hand vaguely. "All of this? The Fears, Rituals… Jonah?"

The question gives Jon pause. He thinks back to his meeting with Xiaoling all those years ago – last June, from her perspective.

"Some of it, I think," he says slowly. "She seemed familiar with some of the Archivist's abilities. There were parts of my visit that struck me as odd at the time. I didn't realize until

later that she had been speaking both Chinese and English at different points in our conversation."

Daisy frowns. "She didn't clue you in?"

"She didn't, no. But…"

Elias made a good choice, the Librarian's voice echoes in Jon's mind. *I did offer him someone, but he thought the language might be too much for him.*

It does tickle me, Jonah's voice chimes in, *that in this world of would-be occult dynasties and ageless monsters, the Chosen One is simply that – someone I chose.*

"I don't know if she's aware of Elias' true identity." Jon swallows with some difficulty, his mouth suddenly dry. "Or his intentions."

"So is it really smart to trust her?"

"If she's in communication with him, there's nothing she can tell him that he doesn't already know. We're just following up on information he gave us. And he's likely spying on our correspondence whether she's in contact with him or not. Not much we can do about that."

"She could have her own ulterior motives," Daisy says.

"True enough, but… I got the sense that her primary interest is curation. Studying phenomena, building a knowledge base–"

"In service to cosmic evil," Daisy says pointedly.

"W-well, yes, but – I don't think she has delusions of godhood herself, and I don't think Jonah has tempted her with the idea." Jon huffs to himself. "He wouldn't want to share his

throne."

"Hm."

"I'm not saying we trust her *or* the Research Centre as a whole. I had reservations about their motives then and I still do. It's not unthinkable that they're a front for something more sinister in the same way that the Institute is. But… I don't think there's any especial danger in utilizing their library."

"Sims," Daisy sighs, "your danger meter is broken beyond repair."

"In my defense," Jon says, bracing one arm on the desk to leverage himself to his feet, "at this point, everything is just differing degrees of dangerous."

As the two of them leave the tunnels, Jon's phone buzzes in his pocket. When he glances at the screen, he sees a text notification from Naomi – in addition to two missed calls. He frowns to himself. The two of them text regularly, but she rarely calls.

"What's up?" Daisy asks, her brow furrowing in concern.

"Naomi," Jon says distractedly, already returning the call. Naomi picks up on the first ring.

"Jon?" Naomi's voice sounds thick and tear-clogged.

A cold weight settles in Jon's stomach. "What's wrong?"

"I j-just" – Naomi pauses to clear her throat – "just needed to hear a familiar voice."

“What happened?” Jon asks – and realizes too late that in his urgency to discover the source of her distress, he’s poured too much of himself into the question.

“Nothing.” What starts out as a self-deprecating little laugh quickly deteriorates into a half-sob. “Nothing new, anyway. It’s always like this, this time of year. Evan and I didn’t have an exact date planned, but we’d talked about an autumn wedding. Thought it would be fitting, since we met in September, you know? Tomorrow is our anniversary, actually. Or – or it would’ve been. A-and then by the time I’ve picked myself back up, the holidays will have crept up on me, and *that’s* always hard, and – and then before I know it, it’s March, a-and that’s its *own* kind of anniversary, and it’s just… it’s a lot.”

“Oh, I – Naomi, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to–”

“It’s fine,” she says with a sniff. “Don’t think I would’ve been able to get it all out, otherwise.”

“S-still, I–”

“It’ll be three years this March. And it still feels like it was yesterday. I spend six months out of the year feeling like I’m still stumbling through that cemetery, and I just…”

This time last year, Jon thinks with a lurch, *I was still the monster in her nightmares.*

And even now, he still pulls her there whenever they’re both asleep.

“When does that *stop?”* Naomi laughs again, a desperate, pleading thing. “When does the healing come in?”

“I… I don’t know,” Jon says truthfully. “Anniversaries are… they’re hard enough on their own. It doesn’t help that… well, it’s difficult to heal from something when you’re still living it.”

“What do you mean? Evan’s *dead*,” Naomi says, her voice breaking on the word. “He’s not coming back. It’s… it’s over.”

“There are still the dreams. The narrative might have changed, but the stage dressing is still the same.” Jon draws his shoulders in, one arm pressed tight to his stomach. “Keeping the memory fresh.”

“It’s not so bad.” Naomi sniffles again. “Better than being alone.”

“‘Alone’ or ‘nightmares’ shouldn’t be your only options.”

“I have my own nightmares, you know,” Naomi counters, sounding slightly annoyed. “When I’m asleep and you’re not. And they’re worse, because in them, I actually *am* alone. Nothing supernatural about it. It’s just… me.” She sighs. “This time last year – and the year before – I didn’t have anyone. And I just… I didn’t – I don’t want to be alone.”

“You’re not,” Jon says. “Not anymore.”

“I – I know, but I…” Naomi takes a breath. “I was… I was thinking – maybe tomorrow I could come by.”

“I’m sorry,” Jon says gently, “truly I am – but it’s not safe. Especially for you, *especially* right now. Not with Peter here.”

Naomi is already the equivalent of an unfinished meal to the Lonely. That, together with her association with Jon, is more than enough to mark her as a potential target should Peter take notice of her.

“Feels safer than being alone,” Naomi says. “The Duchess helps – a *lot* – but I…” She lets out a fond but tearful chuckle. “I can’t expect her to grasp the nuances of… grief, or

loneliness, or what have you."

"How about this," Jon says. "We tell Georgie what's going on – as much or as little as you'd like, even if it's as simple as 'I don't want to be alone right now.' I doubt she'd be opposed to having you over."

"I wouldn't want to impose. I mean, I – I've not spent much time with her outside of just… spamming the group chat with cat photos. I like her, but she's *your* friend. I'm just… a friend of a friend."

Nestled between the words is a familiar sentiment, unarticulated and nonetheless resounding, echoing all of the earnest conviction it had when first she made such a confession: *All my friends had been his friends, and once he was gone it didn't feel right to see them. I know, I'm sure they wouldn't have minded, they would have said they were my friends too, but I could never bring myself to try. It felt more comfortable, more familiar, to be alone…*

"People can have more than one friend," Jon says. "I can't speak for Georgie, but she wouldn't go out of her way to talk to you if she didn't like you."

Indeed, that might be the reason Jon was able to open up to Georgie in the first place. He observed early on in their acquaintance that she had no qualms disengaging from people whom she had no interest in getting to know. Whatever Jon might have felt about himself on any given day, the simple fact of the matter was that Georgie would never have let him get so close if she hadn't seen *something* redeeming in him.

And she likely wouldn't be letting him *stay* close now if she didn't still see something worth salvaging.

"It's up to you, of course," he says. "But I think Georgie would be more receptive to friendship than you expect. And I think – I think you'd get along with Melanie, too." Naomi is silent on the other end of the line. "At the risk of overstepping, I… I know being alone feels like the natural state of things, but it doesn't have to be. If you want, I can talk to Georgie. Lay the groundwork. I won't give her any of the details – it's not my story to tell – I'll just let her know that you're feeling alone and could use some companionship."

“Okay,” Naomi whispers. “Just… let her know she’s not obligated.”

“I will. On the *extremely* off chance she says no, or if she’s busy tomorrow, I can keep you company remotely. We can spend the whole day holding up the office landline if you want.”

“It’s a Friday.”

“And?”

“It’s a work day?”

“Naomi, my job is wholly comprised of monologuing to any tape recorder that manifests within a six-foot radius and doing my utmost to render my department as counterproductive to both the Institute’s professed *and* clandestine organizational objectives as humanly or inhumanly possible.” Naomi barks out a startled laugh. “I won’t be fired no matter what I do – which is a shame, seeing as it became my foremost professional development goal somewhere between finding out my boss murdered my predecessor and virtually dying in an explosion at an evil wax museum. Barring a sudden and unexpected apocalyptic threat – which, admittedly, is unlikely but not *unthinkable* – I’ve already cleared my non-existent schedule for you.”

“Okay.” Naomi makes a sound somewhere between a sniffle and a chuckle. “Thanks. Really.”

“Any time.”

The statement is an unnerving, circuitous thing: a firsthand account from an unnamed member of the Drake-Norris expedition in 1589. In many ways, it’s eerily similar to the last statement Jon accessed from Pu Songling’s archives: Second Lieutenant Charles Fleming’s shellshocked, guilt-fueled confession of atrocities committed under orders.

The historical record is rife with accounts of Francis Drake's cruelty, Jon knows: his role in the transatlantic slave trade, the unprovoked massacres committed in his name, the preemptive strikes that incited further bloodshed. The statement giver speaks in awestruck horror of the bloodlust lurking in the man's eyes, the vitriolic fervor with which he undertook his campaign to seek out and destroy the remnants of the Spanish fleet – and the depths of his rage when his efforts ended in defeat. Humiliated, he turned his vengeful eye to the Galician estuaries.

The writer tells plainly of his own complicity in the sacking of Vigo, razing the town to the ground and slaughtering its inhabitants with indiscriminate zeal. For four days Drake's men carried out their rampage, retreating only when reinforcements arrived to stem the tide.

"You may ask yourself," the Archivist reads on, "how it is that a man born into the reign of Good Queen Bess sits before you today, some four centuries past his due?

"You see, as we left the shores of Galicia that day, I heard from behind us a vicious braying, as if someone had set loose a great host of hounds. They were close – close enough for me to sense their stinking breath hot on the back of my neck. Such a thing was impossible, for we were by that time far from shore, having already rowed half the distance between the beach and the waiting armada. That did not stop me dreading the dogs lunging and tearing into me at any moment.

"I am not ashamed to admit that I let out a whimper.

"As the seconds ticked by and the pack failed to descend upon us, my curiosity grew to outweigh my terror. I turned to look – and was thus ensnared. It was, I realize now, the instant at which I became beholden to the blood. My greatest folly.

"Perhaps I oughtn't have been so surprised to see no hounds surging toward us atop the waves, but you must understand that the proximity of their snarling was far more convincing than their visual absence. In looking behind us, though, I was able to appreciate the havoc we left in our wake: the great plumes of ash rising from the smoldering rubble, backlit by a flickering orange glow, and wails of despair so profound as to combat the noise of the wind, the waves – even the discordant shrieking of the hounds.

“It was a scene of such devastation as I had never seen before or since. Looking back, I think upon the acrid stench of charred flesh on the breeze with horror and… indescribable remorse. It shames me now to admit that at that time, I had never felt such… *rapture*.

“That was when a motion caught my eye. Between the distance and the billowing smoke, it should have been impossible to discern such detail, yet there he was: quarry I had left for dead, emerging from the debris and staggering away from the ruins of his… *wretched* life. As he looked out to behold our retreat, I could see the grief playing on his face, the fury, the fear – but what most set my blood to boiling was the spark of *relief* I saw in his eyes.

“It awakened something in me – a famished and merciless thing, composed of tooth and claw and a mind beginning and ending and utterly encompassed by the call of the pack. With a roaring in my ears and a single-minded violence supplanting my sensibilities, I deserted the rowboat and swam to shore. A chorus of howls carried me forward, and I let them be my wings, steering me down the swiftest, straightest path to my target.

“I slowed for nothing, and I made certain my prey did not live through the night.

“As you can likely guess, the chase did not end there. Those baying devils who had so called me forth continued to hound my steps, nipping at my heels, spurring me ever onward to the next quarry. Those who once knew me would scarcely have recognized what I became. Whenever I dared look into a mirror, I would see in myself a dogged, seething violence so akin to that which had lived in the eyes of my former commander. A cruelty that once had frightened and repulsed me had become the blood and breath of me.

“For a time I sought to refrain from the chase. The longer I refused the call, the weaker I became. The hounds’ breath on my neck grew hotter; their braying swelled louder. I found myself wasting away: always hungry, never sated. Eventually my faculties began to slip. I would lose myself to such… *bestial* impulses, and only the stain of blood on my teeth would return to me my reason. It pains me to confess to you now that it did not take long before I ceased my resistance entirely.

“It was at the turn of the sixteenth century that I happened upon the artefacts now in your possession. Their previous owner was a formidable adversary. I spent nearly a fortnight tracking him before I managed to run him down, and he fought like a tempest before he fell.

“Ordinarily I did not linger after a kill, instinct hastening me ever onward to the next great game. As I turned to leave, though, I was overcome by the sense that the hunt was… unfinished. Troubled, I reached down to check the man’s pulse. I was reassured to find him quite dead, but as I drew back, I noticed the brooch.

“It was a simple thing made of tarnished copper, fashioned into an incomplete ring, the ends of which resembled the heads of dogs. The moment my fingers brushed that ornament, I knew it was meant for me. It went into my pocket with nary a conscious thought.

“The itch of the hunt was still crawling down my spine, though; the frantic snuffling of phantom hounds yet filling the air all around me. I continued to search his person until I found what was calling out to me: a thin volume bound in leather. Curiosity ever my folly, I opened it.

“Up until that point, I had never learned to read nor write Latin with any degree of mastery. Yet I could understand the text within with perfect clarity. The script did not transform to English before my eyes, nor did the book render me proficient in the language. No, I simply… beheld the pages, and the meaning flowed into me.

“The story tells of Herla, legendary king of the Britons, who visits the dwarf king’s realm. Upon leaving, he is gifted a hound and warned not to dismount his horse until the dog leaps down. When Herla and his men return to the human world, they discover that not days but centuries have passed: all those they had known have long since perished, and the Saxons have taken possession of the land. In their distress, some of the men dismount, whereupon they turn to dust. Herla warns the survivors to stay in their saddles, to wait until the dog leaps down.

“‘The dog has not yet alighted,’ the author tells us, ‘and the story says that this King Herla still holds on his mad course with his band in eternal wanderings, without stop or stay.’

“The next several pages are unreadable. The language resembles none I have ever encountered, and I have yet to find a soul who can decipher it. I can however attest its hypnotic qualities. I have spent many hours mired in those words, but I could not for the life of me tell you what I saw there. Others to whom I presented the text found themselves either enthralled or agitated, though none could recall such episodes once lucidity returned to them. I expect you mean to unravel its secrets, but you may do well to let its mystery stand.

“The final passage – a single page, this written in English – tells of Herla’s escape: how, weary and driven to despair, he casts the dog from the saddle and into the River Wye. The instant the hound hits the water, Herla and his band crumble into dust, at last meeting the same fate they spent so many hundreds of years trying to outpace.

“I have had hundreds of years of my own since first reading the tale to digest its message, and that is why I come to you today. Although I have killed several times since these items came into my possession – it should come as no surprise that there are those who covet them – I have not sought out a single hunt since I vanquished the man who yielded me these trinkets. The hounds at my heel have not ceased their clamoring, but so long as the brooch is on my person, they cannot sink their teeth in me. I am always hungry, yes – but I am no longer starving.

“But I am also weary. I have come to understand that even as the hounds can never catch me, they will never leave me. In my four hundred years, I have played the role of both the hunter and the hunted, and have learned that they share the same ultimate plight. Whether I be predator or prey, I am trapped in the throes of an endless pursuit. So long as I should live, my blood shall never quiet.

“And that is the key: *so long as I should live.* Even now, the fervor in my blood insists that the hunt is eternal, but I know now that one cannot outrun one’s end forever. Much like my constant, howling companions, Death will always be nipping at my heels. In that sense, he is perhaps the ultimate hunter. Just as I have delivered to him so many souls, neither can I escape his judgment. If ever I am to rest, I must bow to his supremacy.

“And so, like Herla, I shall cast the dog away from the saddle. I leave it in your care now, and the book. I should be so lucky to exit this life with the dignity I denied so many others, though I fear I shall be found undeserving of such a swift end. I can only hope that, whatever my comeuppance should be, I shall have the grace to accept it without complaint.”

With a heavy exhale, Jon depresses the stop button on the recorder, then puts his head in his hands, putting pressure on his closed eyes.

“You alright?” Basira asks.

“More than I’d like,” Jon mutters.

“If I thought there was any chance this guy was still alive, I wouldn’t have given you the statement to read.”

“I know. Just…” Jon waves his hand vaguely.

“Unpleasant, yeah.”

And rejuvenating, Jon thinks bitterly. It’s only been a couple of days since his last statement from Daisy, and already he had begun to feel famished. Granted, it’s not nearly as filling as a live statement, but it’s better than rereading a story he’s already archived.

“They sent along some supplemental records,” Basira says, rifling through printouts. “The statement is cross-referenced with two objects in their Collections Storage – here.”

The document she slides across the desk contains two catalogue listings:

Item No. 9820702-1

Description:
Pennanular brooch, copper alloy. Geometric and interlace motifs. Confronted zoomorphic terminals (canine profile). Moderate surface oxidization and patination. Dimensions: 5.5cm x 4.5cm body; 12.5cm pin. Artefact dated ca. 500–700 CE.

Properties:
Primary subject (Case No. 9820702) reports mediating effect on the Hunter’s affliction (unverified). Item implicated in subject’s alleged abnormal longevity (unverified). Further study suggests dormancy and/or lack of reactivity to unafflicted subjects (see associated Investigation Log).

Storage:
Special Collections – Inorganic Storage, Container Unit No. 982-05. Acid-free board housing, etherfoam packing. Environmental parameters in brief: maintain stable temperature

(16-20°C); relative humidity, 32-35%; light levels, <300 lux. Handling protocols as per Acquisitions & Collections Policies and Procedures §3.5.3: *Artefact Preservation – Metals – Copper and Copper Alloys.*

Access:
Upon request. Curator approval required prior to initial visit. Applicants may submit statement of intent to Acquisitions & Collections Department Head Curator for clearance. Terms, procedures, and degree of supervision subject to Curator's discretion.

Provenance:
Surrendered 2nd July, 1982 upon receipt of accompanying statement (Case No. 9820702), subject name unknown. See also Item No. 9820702-2.

Appendices:

- Investigation Log No. 9820702-1;
- Supplemental Documents Nos. 9820702-1.01 through -1.03.

Cross-reference:

- Case No. 9820702;
- Item No. 9820702-2;
- Acquisitions & Collections Catalog §3.6.4: *Antiquities – Adornments and Jewelry (Inert).*

Item No. 9820702-2

Description:
Bound manuscript. Front and back covers unembellished leather (source undetermined) stretched over wood board (source undetermined). Leather cord binding (calf, bovine). Paper and parchment leaves. Ink corrosion and paper degradation present but minimal (fair condition inconsistent with age and media). Dimensions: 8.8cm x 14.0cm x 2.5cm. Artefact dated ca. 1190–1450 CE.

Contents:
Eighteen (18) pages total, one-sided.

- Title page (1) iron gall ink on parchment (sheepskin): *Gualterius Mappus – De nugis curialium – xi. De Herla rege*
- Pages two (2) through four (4) iron gall ink on paper (hemp pulp, linen fiber): Medieval Latin (ca. 12th century) script.
- Pages five (5) through sixteen (16) ink (chemical composition undetermined) on paper (cotton fiber): alphabetic script (unknown roots); refer to Supplemental Document No. 9820702-2.03 for comparative linguistic analysis (inconclusive).

- Page seventeen (17) ink (chemical composition undetermined) on paper (cotton fiber): Middle English (ca. 15th century) script.
- Page eighteen (18) parchment (sheepskin): blank.

Transcripts and translations (where possible) provided in Supplemental Document No. 9820702-2.01*.

Properties:
Primary subject (Case No. 9820702) reports total comprehension of Latin portions of the text despite lack of proficiency. Text alleged to diverge from source material *(De nugis curialium* – Map, Walter, fl. 1200). Both claims verified upon further examination (see associated Investigation Log). Probable association with the Hunter's affliction.

Storage:
Special Collections – Secure Storage. Environmental parameters in brief: maintain temperature at 20-22°C; relative humidity, 32-36%; light levels, ≤50 lux. Housing and handling protocols as per Acquisitions & Collections Policies and Procedures §2.5.5: *Document Preservation – Premodern Inks – Iron Gall* and §9.2: *Special Precautions – Occult and Esoteric Texts.*

Access:
Restricted.

Provenance:
Surrendered 2nd July, 1982 upon receipt of accompanying statement (Case No. 9820702), subject name unknown. See also Item No. 9820702-1.

Appendices:

- Investigation Log No. 9820702-2;
- Supplemental Documents Nos. 9820702-2.01* through -2.07;
- Incident Report No. 9930214.

Cross-reference:

- Case No. 9820702;
- Item No. 9820702-1;
- Acquisitions & Collections Catalog §2.1.1: *Archival Media – Occult Books (Active);*
- Interdepartmental Bulletin No. 9941002, "The Library of Jurgen Leitner: Lessons Learned."

**Addendum, 16th February, 1993:* Supplemental Document No. 9820702-2.01 reclassified as Restricted Access. Direct all inquiries to Pu Songling Research Library Head Librarian or Acquisitions & Collections Department Head Curator.

"So?" Basira prods. "What do you make of it?"

“W-well, it seems…”

“Promising, right?” Basira says, her eagerness tinted with relief. “If we can–”

She stops abruptly as the tape recorder on the table clicks back on.

“I think that’s our cue to move this conversation elsewhere,” Jon says.

Not that it will stop the tape recorders from listening in, but Jon can feel a familiar prickling sensation on the back of his neck now, and he has no desire to make Jonah’s surveillance any easier for him.

It takes some hemming and hawing, but Jon manages to convince Basira that this really ought to be a group discussion. As she recaps the statement and shares her own remarks, Jon keeps a close eye on the other two people in the room. Martin is listening attentively, leaning forward slightly but otherwise at ease. Daisy, though… she’s all corded muscles and jittery legs, taut and precarious on the edge of her seat.

All the while, Basira appears impervious to the storm brewing in Daisy’s eyes, even as Martin catches on and begins chewing on the inside of his cheek, darting nervous glances between the two of them. By the time Basira finishes her overview, the tension in the air is palpable, nearly electric.

For several seconds, no one speaks.

“So,” Martin says, his voice a bit pitchy. He clears his throat before continuing. “Magical, Fear-resistant brooch, huh?”

“It wouldn’t be unheard of,” Jon says. “Remember what I told you about Mikaele Salesa?”

“The apocalypse-proof bubble? Yeah.”

“That camera of his didn’t just protect him from the Eye, it hid him from the Powers in general.”

“What was the catch?” Daisy asks pointedly. “Got to be a catch.”

“Does there?” Martin asks. His hesitant smile falls at Daisy’s blank stare, and he tilts his head back with a sigh. “Yeah, alright.”

“It’s… not entirely benign, no,” Jon says. “In Salesa’s statement, he called it a ‘battery’–”

“–charging itself on all the quiet worries that come from living in hiding, and then when the sanctuary collapses, all that fear flows out at once. No doubt, if my oasis breaks before I die, the Eye will get quite the feast from me, but in this new world–”

“That’s enough of that, I think,” Martin says, resting a hand on Jon’s arm.

Jon bites his tongue, shuts his eyes, and takes a deep breath in, only daring to speak once the tingling on his lips subsides. “Sorry.”

“Nothing to apologize for.” Martin offers him a reassuring smile. “Just didn’t want you getting bogged down.”

“That’s one term for it,” Jon says, not quite under his breath. It’s true enough, though. Sometimes it feels like the Archive is pressed up against the door, watching for the tiniest crack, waiting for any opportunity to surge through and drag him under. Lately, Martin has grown uncannily adept at sensing when to interrupt these lapses before they spiral out of control – likely because they’ve been growing more frequent.

“That’s what I thought,” Daisy says. Puzzled at the apparent *non sequitur*, Jon glances at her, but she isn’t looking at him. All of her attention is focused on Basira. “This thing is probably the same. It’s not some… some harmless miracle solution. If we mess around with it, it’s bound to blow up in our faces sooner or later.”

“I’m… not sure about that, actually,” Jon says. “The brooch didn’t free the Hunter, it just made it so he couldn’t be caught. I think that’s what it was feeding on – the Hunter’s gradual awareness that he was no different from the hunted, that sensation of being perpetually stalked from the shadows by a greater predator. It spent centuries charging itself on that fear, and it culminated in the realization that he would never escape it. He would always be waiting for the axe to fall, and Hunt was happy to keep him as perpetual prey. If he wanted the chase to end, he had to give up the artefact – and once it was no longer keeping him in stasis, he had a choice to make.”

“Go back to hunting, or let it catch him.” Daisy breathes a humorless laugh. “The Hunt, or the End.”

“But it would keep you alive,” Basira says. “It would buy us time to find a way to free you for real.”

“What about the Leitner?” Martin asks. “That’s what Jonah sent us after in the first place.”

“Turns out it’s not actually from Leitner’s library,” Jon says. “No bookplate, and it seems the statement giver had it in his possession since the 1500s. It’s… difficult to tell from the statement whether it had any significant effect on him. He called it ‘hypnotic,’ but he was already a Hunter by the time he found it. I imagine it might have different effects on someone not already under the Hunt’s influence.”

“He sort of alluded to that.” Basira takes a moment to peruse the statement, running her finger along the page until she finds the relevant line. “Here – they ‘found themselves either enthralled or agitated.’ A bit obscure, but… he says it like it’s an afterthought. If it outright turned anyone into a Hunter, he probably would’ve said so.”

“That doesn’t mean it isn’t dangerous,” Daisy says.

“I never said it wasn’t,” Basira replies coolly. “The record references a transcript, so I assume they had someone read it at some point. And it also mentions an incident report.”

“What was the incident?” Martin asks.

“Don’t know,” Basira says. “They didn’t provide any other supplemental documentation, just the catalogue listing and the statement itself. But they acquired the book in ‘82 and didn’t make the transcript restricted until ‘93, so… either it was dormant when they first studied it and became active later, or they didn’t study it closely enough to activate its effects, or it doesn’t affect everyone the same way, or – or maybe their workplace safety guidelines just changed and they decided not to risk studying it anymore.”

“Jonah did say something about its effects varying depending on how much of it a person reads, right?” Martin asks. “Though who knows where he got that from.”

“There might be some truth to that,” Basira says. “The catalogue entry does describe what’s on the title page, so I’m assuming that part at least is safe. I’m most curious about the untranslated chunk in the middle.”

And I’m a universal translator, Jon thinks, fidgeting with the drawstring of his hoodie. Basira’s eyes flick to him, as if reading his mind.

“I… suppose I could–”

“No,” Martin and Daisy say simultaneously.

Jon scowls. “You didn’t even let me finish–”

“You threw yourself into the Buried – *twice* – to save me,” Daisy says severely. “You can’t keep sacrificing yourself at every opportunity.”

“I wouldn’t be–”

“What, re-traumatizing yourself by reading a Leitner?” Jon shuts his mouth, pressing his lips tightly together. “It’s not worth it, Sims.”

“Daisy,” Basira begins, but Daisy cuts her off.

“No. I’m not having him throw himself to the wolves just because you’re *curious.”*

Basira flinches, hurt momentarily crossing her face before her expression goes stony.

“You really think that’s what this is about?” she says, her voice shaking. “Knowledge for knowledge’s sake? Me being *curious?”*

“You can’t tell me you’re not,” Daisy says, and then her expression softens. “And I love that about you, I do – you’re *brilliant*, Basira – and driven, and passionate, and…” She sighs. “But sometimes… sometimes you need to let things go.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jon notices Martin cross and uncross his legs, his lower lip captured between his teeth. When Jon catches his eye, Martin jerks his chin minutely at Basira and Daisy, a grimace on his face. All Jon can offer is a helpless, equally awkward shrug. Near as he can tell, Basira and Daisy seem to have momentarily forgotten that they have an audience, and judging from their locked eyes and thunderous expressions, he doubts either of them would appreciate a reminder right this second.

“Let *you* go, you mean,” Basira says tersely. “When you say ‘it’s not worth it,’ what you really mean is that *you’re* not worth it.”

“Well, I’m not.”

The cavalier tone is the last straw, it seems.

“Why won’t you just let me *help you?”* Basira slams her hand down on the rickety table, straining its wobbly legs. “You’re just so ready to–” She lets out a frustrated groan. “You never used to give up this easily.”

“Maybe should’ve done,” Daisy says flatly. “Might’ve lowered my body count.”

“Giving up Hunting doesn’t have to mean giving up on *living,*” Basira says. “I might have finally found an alternative, and you won’t even *consider*–”

“I’m not doing anything that’s going to hurt someone, and that includes exposing Jon to a fucking *Leitner.”*

“I’m right here, you know,” Jon mutters testily, the friction finally getting the better of his nerves. “Don’t I get a say?”

“No, you don’t,” Daisy says, rounding on him. Now that all of her brimming agitation is funneled in his direction, he regrets saying anything at all. “Because lately, whenever I ask you if you want to hurt yourself, the best you can give me is ‘it doesn’t matter because I can’t die anyway.’”

“Jon?” Martin says urgently, his eyebrows drawing together.

“Th-that’s not what I–”

“You’re not thinking rationally,” Daisy speaks over Jon’s stammering. “You’re thinking like a condemned man with a rope around his neck and something to prove, and I’m not going to be the noose you use to hang yourself with.”

“Will you *listen* to yourself?” Basira says heatedly. “You get on *my* case about double standards–”

“That’s *enough!”* Martin bursts out. “This isn’t helping. Daisy’s right, Jon. You’re not going anywhere near that book – I don’t want to hear it,” he adds before Jon can retort. “Not now, anyway. We’ll talk later. But Basira’s right, too,” Martin says, turning his attention to Daisy. “You can’t make amends by dying, and you can’t do better going forward if you’re not alive to try.”

“Who says I deserve a chance?” Daisy says.

“Whatever you *think* you ‘deserve’” – Martin gives Jon a meaningful glance as he says it – “you’ve *got* a chance, and people who want to help you through it, and you ought to consider that before you assume you’d do more good dead than alive.” He exhales a sharp breath. “Anyway, forget the Leitner, and forget what Jonah said about it. The brooch seems like the more promising option here.”

“I agree,” Jon says, cowed. “Between the book and the brooch, the statement giver credited the latter with keeping the Hunt at bay. And perhaps my bias is showing, but truthfully I – I’m not inclined to see those books as anything but tragedies waiting to happen.”

“What’s the difference?” Daisy says flatly. “It took a decade for something bad enough to happen for them to make the Leitner’s transcript restricted. The brooch could be just as much of a time bomb. Just because it doesn’t have any ‘incidents’ connected with it now doesn’t mean it never will.”

She isn’t wrong. Looking back, Jon had found it infuriating that Leitner would continue meddling with the books even after he witnessed the horror they wrought, all while claiming to have learned from his hubris. Just because this particular artefact isn’t a *book* doesn’t make it any less ominous.

And yet…

“I think it’s already shown its more sinister side,” Jon says slowly.

“You *think,*” Daisy scoffs.

“It doesn’t give a Hunter strength, it makes them perpetual prey. It… won’t be pleasant for you, I’m sure,” Jon admits, “but Basira’s right – it could keep you alive while we search for a better solution.”

“There might not *be* a better solution,” Daisy says stubbornly.

“Which is what I said before you browbeat me into taking statements from you,” Jon counters.

“I didn’t *browbeat*–” Jon raises his eyebrows. Daisy gives a flustered groan. “It’s just – it’s different, okay?”

Much as Jon wants to disagree, he knows better than to argue. They’d only end up talking in circles.

“I think it’s an avenue worth pursuing,” he says. “Given the alternatives.”

“Please, Daisy,” Basira says. “Just… consider it, at least.”

The *for me* remains unspoken, but Jon can hear it loud and clear. As can Daisy, it seems – the defiant set to her jaw falters for a moment before she tenses again.

“Fine,” she says grudgingly. “But if it starts to go south–”

“If it manifests any new properties, we’ll prioritize containing it over interacting with it,” Jon says.

“You promise?” Daisy asks, but she looks at Basira when she says it. It takes a moment, but Basira does nod.

“Do you think Pu Songling will let us have it?” Martin asks. “Seems like their protocols are…”

“Rigorous?” Jon supplies.

“You’d almost think they were running an academic institution or something,” Basira says drily.

“Yeah, but treating the artefacts like museum pieces, it’s… it’s *weird,* isn’t it?” Martin says. “It’s not as if they’re fragile, right? They’re held together by… nightmare alchemy, or whatever.”

“I suppose it’s to be expected,” Jon says. “I know the Librarian has a degree in information science. And I recall her telling me that the Curator is an historian with a background in museology. But you’re right – it *would* be nice if Leitners were as delicate as the average old manuscript.”

“At least they’re flammable,” Daisy mutters.

“We spoke with the Head Curator,” Basira says. “She’s willing to work out a trade.”

“A trade?” Martin asks.

“Knowledge for knowledge,” Jon says. “An artefact for an artefact. I get the impression that the Librarian and the Curator are both very… collections-oriented. True to their titles, I suppose.”

“Hold up,” Daisy says. “‘The Librarian,’ ‘the Curator’ – are those just job titles, or are they, like… Beholding Avatar titles?” Jon blinks at her, perplexed. “I mean – the way you keep saying them, it’s sort of like…”

“What, ‘Archivist’?” Jon gnaws on his thumbnail as he pauses to consider. “I… don’t know, actually. I wasn’t really doing it consciously? It just…” He shrugs helplessly. “It felt right.”

“Is it coming from the Eye, then?”

“I have no idea, Basira.” Jon leans forward, props his elbows on his knees, and digs the heels of his palms into his eyes. “I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“Hm.”

“In any case…” Jon exhales slowly, forcing himself to sit up straight again. “They seem to take the research and curation aspects of their roles to heart. They aren’t reckless with their pursuits, they take ample precautions, but the scholars at Pu Songling do study the items that come into their possession. And from what I understand, the Curator takes avid interest in adding to their collection. Same as the Archivist’s role is to record stories. To what extent her efforts are driven by her connection to the Eye versus her own innate curiosity, I couldn’t tell you, no more than I can make that distinction in myself.”

“Sort of a chicken-or-egg situation, then,” Daisy says.

“From an evolutionary perspective, the egg came first,” Jon says automatically. “Amniotic eggs have been around for over three hundred million years. Birds originated in the Jurassic, true galliforms didn’t evolve until at least the Late Cretaceous, phasianids don’t appear in the fossil record until around thirty million years ago, and chickens as we know them were only domesticated about eight thousand years ago–”

“Oh my god,” Daisy groans, putting her head in her hands.

“What?” Jon says, heat rising in his cheeks as Martin muffles a snicker beneath his hand. “I’m not *wrong*.”

“Pu Songling’s Collections Department is larger than our Artefact Storage,” Basira interjects, “but the, uh… *Curator* has a shortlist of artefacts she’s been on the lookout for. I checked our records and found a match. A ring – probably belongs to the Vast, based on the reports surrounding it. Looks like the Institute purchased it from Salesa in 2014, shortly before his disappearance. The Curator considers it an ‘equitable exchange,’ but she still wants to assess the ring in person before making the trade.”

“And we still have to talk to Sonja,” Jon adds. “On the one hand, she likely wouldn’t object to being rid of an artefact, but on the other hand… I imagine she won’t be keen on letting it out into the world.”

“I think it would be a harder sell if you were just going to swap it out for another artefact – something unfamiliar that they’d have to develop all new protocols for,” Martin says. “But yeah, even if you won’t be making the brooch her problem, she’ll probably still want to know what we want with it. And I can see her pressing the Curator on why she wants the ring when she gets here.”

“The Curator won’t be coming here,” Basira says evenly, casting a surreptitious glance at Daisy to gauge her reaction. “Says she’s too busy to travel.”

“So you have to haul the ring up to her,” Daisy says.

“I mean” – Basira breathes an uneasy laugh – “it’s a *ring*. Not much hauling involved–”

“Oh, don’t start–”

“–and there are precautions I can take. Looks like Artefact Storage has relatively thorough documentation for this one.”

“‘Relatively’?” Daisy repeats, unimpressed. “You were *just* complaining about how sparse their records are. ‘Relatively’ isn’t saying much.”

“Well, it’s better than nothing.” Basira rubs at her face. “I have to do this. Just… trust me.”

“You know I do–”

“Then let me have your back,” Basira says, practically pleading. “Let me help you.”

“Fine,” Daisy mutters, her posture going slack. “Do what you want.”

It’s not exactly a resounding endorsement, but it’s as good as they’re likely to get.

Despite Daisy’s lack of enthusiasm, Basira immediately throws herself into making arrangements. The Curator at Pu Songling is more than accommodating, seemingly as eager as Basira to make the trade. The real challenge is the Head of Artefact Storage.

It takes over a week of cajoling, lengthy justifications, and a concerted, collaborative effort from Basira, Jon, *and* Martin before Sonja finally, albeit reluctantly, agrees to discuss the matter with the Curator. Over the following days, Basira and Jon facilitate negotiations between the two: mediating a fair amount of (professional, but nevertheless pointed) verbal sparring early on, and later arbitrating the terms and conditions of the trade.

“You’d think that in the course of dealing with literal supernatural evil on a daily basis,” Basira gripes at one point, “bureaucracy wouldn’t be the biggest priority.”

“I’ve found that the bureaucratic process gives me ample time to make assessments,” Sonja says, unruffled. “Red tape has a way of bringing out the worst in people. Sometimes that’s a procrastinating student who woke up this morning, realized their deadline is next week, and ‘needs access to our materials, like, *yesterday*,’” she says, complete with finger quotes and a mocking tone. “And sometimes it’s some shady rich snob who’s been consistently cagey about his motives, and eventually he starts to go from impatient and entitled to desperate and aggressive, and *that’s* when the red flags start popping up crimson. After a while, you learn to distinguish the mundane sort of desperation from the more sinister sort.”

“Huh,” Jon says, smiling to himself. He knew Sonja was clever, but he never knew she was so *calculating.* It seems Jonah made the same mistake with her as he did with Gertrude – overestimating a person’s curiosity and malleability, underestimating their prudence and pragmatism, and then promoting them to a position where they were free to act in a decidedly *un*-Beholding-like manner.

Once Sonja is sufficiently assured that the Curator has no intentions of utilizing the artefact or allowing it to venture beyond the secure confines of Pu Songling’s Collections Storage, the process starts to go a bit more smoothly. As expected, Sonja is amenable to the prospect of having one less piece of *malignant costume jewelry,* as she puts it, provided the archival staff take full responsibility – both for the ring once Basira signs it out *and* for the artefact they receive in exchange.

“The ring has a compulsion effect,” Sonja tells them. “Makes people want to put it on – and once it’s on your finger, it’s not coming off until you hit the ground. Luckily it’s not a particularly *active* artefact, at least not compared to some of the other things we have here. I wouldn’t call it *safe,* obviously, but” – she raps her knuckles on the wooden beads of the bracelet on her opposite wrist – “it’s never breached containment.”

The *how* and *why* become abundantly clear upon seeing the closed ring box, so caked in earth and grime that it’s impossible to make out the color or material underneath.

“Buried, I take it,” Basira murmurs, giving Jon a sidelong glance.

“Yeah.” Jon grimaces at the phantom taste of soil on his tongue. “An artefact to contain an artefact.”

“Looks like the Curator is getting a twofer,” Basira says.

“Fine by me,” Sonja says with a nonchalant shrug. “That’s the box it came in, actually. Don’t know why it works, but it does, and that’s all I care about. So long as you keep it closed, the worst you’ll get is vertigo. As far as we’ve observed, anyway. There’s always a chance that an artefact has more secrets than it lets on at first glance. Assuming you know everything there is to know is a good way to end up in a casket.”

“We’re well aware,” Jon says. “Believe me.”

“Seriously, though – if this goes tits up, I don’t want to hear it,” Sonja says sternly, all but wagging a finger. “And if you call up here a few months from now to tell me that you’ve got a rogue artefact wreaking havoc in the Archives, and I’ve got to put *my* people at risk to contain it, I will unleash unholy hell.”

The funny thing is, Jon doesn’t doubt her.

Even as they make progress on obtaining the Hunter’s brooch, dissent continues to simmer within the group – particularly where Daisy is concerned. As the escalating tension in the Archives becomes ever more tangible, Martin begins to feel claustrophobic under the weight of all the things left unspoken.

Daisy is consistently ill-tempered: bellicose in one moment and taciturn in the next, frequently seeking out solitude whenever her agitation gets the best of her. Martin suspects that her volatile mood has as much to do with her deteriorating condition as it does to do with her lingering aversion to the rest of the group’s efforts. Although she and Basira haven’t had another row – so far as Martin is aware, anyway – there’s been an undeniable friction between them. On the worst days, Basira keeps to herself, burying her head in her research while Daisy slinks off to some dark corner of the Archives to brood until Jon comes to drag her away from her thoughts.

Not that Jon is much better. He’s been sullen lately, growing more withdrawn, sleeping less and jumping at shadows even more than usual. Martin often catches him in a trance, staring vacantly into space and droning horrors under his breath. More and more he lapses into the Archive's haunting cadence mid-conversation, regardless of how recently he’s had a statement. Sometimes, all it takes is a momentary slip for Jon to lose his footing and devolve into a frenzied litany of back-to-back, fragmentary horror stories. On a few recent occasions he’s lost his voice entirely, though luckily it’s only been for an hour or two at a time.

(So far, Jon says morosely after each episode.)

Most unsettling, though, is the chronic faraway look in his eye, like he's seeing something else. Like he's some*where* else, lost across an unbridgeable divide.

Martin is well-acquainted with the sensation of feeling alone in the presence of others. That doesn't make it any less distressing. It's not that Jon intends to be distant. He might not even be aware of it; would likely be mortified if he knew just how much that detachment stirred Martin's longstanding fears of isolation and abandonment. Jon's still affectionate, after all. Although he seems reluctant to actively *seek out* comfort these days, he's still prompt to take an outstretched hand, to lean into a kind touch, to accept a proffered embrace. Still makes a concerted effort to muster, however feebly, a soft smile whenever Martin enters a room. Still attempts to be present and attentive and open.

But sometimes it feels like Jon is out of reach, separated from the rest of the world, watching it pass him by through layers of frosted glass. Martin knows the feeling. What he *doesn't* know is how to fix it.

Before long, Basira is set to leave for Beijing, an artefact of the Vast nestled away in her luggage amidst assurances to Sonja that, *yes,* under no circumstances will Basira attempt to take it on a plane or into the open ocean because, *no,* Basira does *not* have a death wish, thank you very much.

Martin half-expects another quarrel to break out on the eve of Basira's departure, but Daisy is oddly subdued. Perhaps she's come to accept the rest of the group's decision to move forward with the plan, or maybe she just doesn't want to part ways with angry words and unresolved arguments. Considering the dark circles under her eyes, it's just as likely that she's simply too fatigued to start a fight.

A few days later, Martin descends the ladder into the tunnels to find Jon standing at his makeshift desk, staring down at the map unfurled across its surface – the product of the group's ongoing efforts to survey the sprawling tunnel system of the former Millbank Prison. The blueprint-in-progress is an equally sprawling thing: sheets of mismatched paper layered one atop the next and taped together, its irregular borders comprised of haphazard angles and dog-eared edges.

The hand-drawn map on its surface is chaotic, reflecting the penmanship of four different authors. Jon's contributions might be the messiest – the burn scar contracture on his dominant hand renders his lines shaky at best, and his handwriting has always been a tad chickenscratch. Daisy's isn't much better. Conversely, Basira's additions are the neatest, her strokes as steady as the persona she tries to project to the world. Martin's are passable, if only because, unlike Jon or Daisy, he actually has the patience to use rulers and book edges to trace straight paths.

To be fair, it would probably look a mess no matter how painstaking they were in constructing it. The tunnels are as labyrinthine as expected: a vast network of arterial corridors with offshoots along their lengths, branching into three- or four-way forks, most of which lead to dead ends. Occasionally, they find a path that loops back around and connects other parts of the maze, creating a series of meandering, convoluted closed circuits. It's difficult to tell just by looking, but they *are* (Martin hopes) making progress. At the rate they're going, they *have* to be on track to find the Panopticon before the winter solstice.

As Martin approaches the desk, he sees that familiar vacant look on Jon's face, as if he isn't actually seeing what's in front of him. The effect is underscored by the cigarette burning away in his hand, hanging limp and forgotten at his side. Martin clears his throat lightly, in deference to Jon's hair-trigger startle reflex. He doesn't count the fact that Jon doesn't jump at all as a success. If anything, it's cause for concern.

"Jon?" Martin tries. There's a slight delay before Jon glances over, giving Martin no acknowledgment aside from a sluggish blink before lowering his head again.

"I, uh…" Martin offers a weak smile, attempting to keep his tone light. He gestures at the cigarette. "I thought you quit?"

Jon shrugs, refusing to meet Martin's eyes. "Not like it'll kill me."

"Might catch up with you later, though," Martin says, scratching at his neck. "You know, once we find a way out of here."

"There *is* no 'out' for me," Jon says mulishly.

“You don’t know that. *Or* Know it.” Jon’s only reaction is to press his lips tightly together, like he’s biting back a retort. “Look, I’m not trying to nag you, I just wor– *Jon!”* Martin yelps as he watches Jon put his cigarette out on the back of his hand.

Martin lunges forward, grabbing Jon’s hand and yanking it close to inspect the damage. It’s the same hand that Jude shook, already textured and pitted with webs of hypertrophic scarring. Somehow, Jon managed to plant this newest burn on a patch of previously-undamaged skin, sandwiched between two bands of knotted tissue.

The contours of her fingers, Martin recognizes with a queasy lurch – followed by another when he thinks to wonder whether Jon sought out that scrap of healthy skin on purpose just now.

Jon barely reacts, staring into space with wide eyes and dilated pupils. Martin looks down again to see the circular singe mark already knitting itself back together, leaving only a small, shiny patch of discoloration ringed with a dusting of ash. In all likelihood, even that will be gone by morning.

If only all wounds would heal so easily.

“What the hell were you *thinking?”* Martin hisses, fighting to keep his voice even. He brushes a soothing thumb over the spot, as if to apologize to the abused skin on Jon’s behalf.

Jogged out of his reverie by Martin’s sharp tone, Jon stares daggers at him, his mouth open as if to unleash a scathing reprimand, the set of his jaw so reminiscent of those early days in the Archives. An instant later, he withers, cringing away and fixing his eyes on the floor.

“I wasn’t,” he mumbles, at least having the decency to sound contrite. “Wasn’t really paying attention.”

It’s not the first time Martin’s witnessed a self-inflicted injury. When pressed, Jon always claims that it’s not a deliberate, planned form of self-punishment, but rather a reflex reaction that kicks in when he starts feeling adrift in time. Somewhere along the line, it seems, he

convinced himself that physical pain is as good a shortcut as any – a sort of panic button to bring him back to the present when he needs grounding.

Whatever his intentions, though, and no matter what rationalizations Jon wants to dole out, it's not a *healthy* coping mechanism. And it's difficult for Martin to believe that self-punishment doesn't factor at all, considering Jon's obsessive guilt spirals and his blasé attitude towards being hurt.

"'S already healed," Jon says with a spiritless shrug. He drops the snuffed-out remainder of his cigarette on the floor and unnecessarily grinds it under his heel.

"That's not the *point*." Martin doesn't realize how tightly he's grasping Jon's hand until Jon winces. Although Martin relaxes his grip somewhat, he doesn't let go. "It doesn't matter how quickly your body heals, or that you've had worse, or whatever other justifications you want to make. You're still getting hurt. That's not okay, and – and if it were me in your shoes, you'd be telling me the same thing."

"I'm sorry." Jon's hair falls to cover his face as he ducks his head.

It's fine, Martin almost says – except it's not, is it?

"Come on," he says instead, guiding Jon to sit in the nearest chair before taking a seat next to him. Where before Jon was all stiff limbs and rigid spine, now he looks like he's given up the ghost, drooping like a wilting flower.

Though he allows Martin to keep hold of his hand, Jon doesn't return the pressure. And Jon's skin is *freezing* – no doubt partly due to the damp chill of the tunnels, and partly because he has, by his own admission, always had terrible circulation. Combined with his limp fingers and loose grip, though, the overall effect is far too reminiscent of those months spent keeping vigil over Jon's hospital bed, his hand nothing but cold, dead weight in Martin's.

It took too long for Martin to admit that he had been foolish to hope that Jon was still in there somewhere, aware of Martin's presence, fighting to regain consciousness. The whole time,

Martin was just keeping his own company. Jon wasn't just unreachable – he wasn't there at all.

(Martin had been wrong about that in the end. He doesn't know that he'll ever forgive himself for not being there when Jon woke up.)

Martin bites his lip as he formulates a response. He's learned over the years that when Jon is like this, it's best to strike a careful balance between docility and defiance. Push too hard too fast, and Jon will dig his heels in; approach him too tentatively, and he's liable to interpret concern as pity; force him to talk about his feelings, and he'll bolt; smother him with tenderness, and he'll balk.

Granted, Jon has become much more receptive to tenderness over the years. Most of the time, anyway. When his skewed self-worth and convictions about what he does and doesn't deserve don't get in the way.

"At the risk of being a nag–"

"You're not a nag," Jon says softly.

"When's the last time you had a statement?"

"A few days ago." The response is too quick, too automatic.

"A few days ago," Martin repeats, allowing a bit of disbelief to seep into his voice.

Jon nods stiffly. "Monday, I think."

"Today is Tuesday."

“I–” Jon cuts off his own retort, turning to blink owlishly at Martin. “Is it?”

“Yeah,” Martin says, his heart sinking. Jon must be losing time again. “So you had a statement yesterday?”

“No, I – I don’t…” Jon squints up at the ceiling, wracking his brain. “I don’t think so? It’s – I think I would recall if it had been shorter than one day.”

“So, last Monday?”

“I don’t – I don’t know,” Jon says, growing testy. “I suppose. Must’ve been.”

“Are you hungry?”

“I’m *always* hungry.” The admission is devoid of all the simmering agitation that had been there only moments before. Now, he just sounds tired.

“Well… I think you might be due for one.” Although Martin had been striving for *gentle suggestion,* there’s a harsh edge to the words. Rather than get Jon’s hackles up again, though, he seems to crumple under what he doubtless reads as an accusation.

“You’re right,” he says hoarsely. “And I’m sorry. I know lately I’ve been…”

“Tetchy,” Martin offers, just as Jon says, “A bit of a prick.”

“Your words, not mine,” Martin says with a tentative grin. Jon returns his own feeble half-smile, but it quickly falters.

“I’ve almost exhausted Daisy’s catalogue,” he confesses. “Only a handful left now. I’ve got to make them last until the solstice.”

An apprehensive chill runs down Martin’s spine at that. “And then what?”

“I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

There’s virtually no chance that Jon, prone to rumination as he is, *hasn’t* been dwelling on it.

“Basira said she has a few statements, right?” Martin asks. “Which… if you already have a statement about an encounter, can you still get nourishment from other statements about it, so long as it’s coming from someone else’s point of view?”

“Probably.” Jon shrugs one shoulder. “The factual details of the encounter are less important than the subject’s emotional response. Different perspective, different story, different lived experience of fear.”

“Then… you have my statement about the Flesh attack, but there’s still Basira’s. And – and maybe Melanie–”

“I’m not taking another statement from Melanie,” Jon says tersely. “She’s been tethered to me for too long without say, and I’m not dragging her back in.”

“But if it’s consensual–”

“It won’t be, because I don’t consent.”

“If the alternative is *literally* starving–”

“I’ll find another alternative. Or I won’t. But I’m not asking Melanie for a statement.” Jon keeps his head bowed, but he looks up at Martin through his lashes. “The first time she quit, I was worried that she might show up in my nightmares again, but she didn’t. I don’t know if her severance from the Eye will *keep* her out of my nightmares if she gives me a new statement, and… I can’t risk it. I can’t do that to her. Even if the nightmares weren’t an issue… I’m not going to ask her to relive yet *another* traumatic experience for my benefit–”

“–I shall choose to die rather than take part in such an unholy meal–”

Jon claps a hand over his mouth, a panicked look in his eye.

“…nor shall I take my own life, whatever extremity my suffering may reach,” he tacks on, too much of an afterthought for comfort.

“Which means we need to plan for the future,” Martin says, forcing calm into his voice despite the way his heart picks up its pace.

“But it can’t involve Melanie,” Jon says – gentler than before, but still firm.

“No, you’re – you’re right,” Martin relents. “It wouldn’t be fair to drag her back in. But we could still ask Basira.”

Jon makes a noncommittal noise, his expression rapidly going pinched and closed off again.

“Lately,” Martin says, licking his lips nervously, “lately it feels like you’ve been shutting everyone out again. It isn’t healthy–”

“Healthy?” Jon’s glare could burn a hole in the floor. “I don’t need to be *healthy,* I just need to be whatever *it* wants.”

Once, Martin might have been daunted by Jon’s scathing tone. By now, he knows that Jon is all bluster – and that the brunt of it is turned inward.

“Please, Jon. Tell me what’s going on. You’re worrying me.”

Those, apparently, are the magic words, because Jon finally capitulates.

“It’s October,” he tells the floor.

“It… is October, yeah.” Bewildered, Martin waits for elaboration. When a minute passes with no response forthcoming, he prompts, “Is that… bad…?”

“Historically, yes, it has been,” Jon says with a tired, frayed-sounding chuckle.

“I… Jon, I need you to help me out here,” Martin says helplessly. “I can’t read your mind.”

“October is when *it* happens, Martin.” Jon glances at Martin once, quickly, before returning his gaze to the ground. He’s twisting one hand around the opposite wrist now, fingers curled tightly enough to blanch his knuckles. “The eighteenth. When everything goes wrong.”

“You mean…”

Jon’s sharp inhale becomes a choked exhale, which in turn abruptly cuts off as the Archive takes its cue.

“…what settled over me wasn’t dread; there wasn’t enough uncertainty for that. It was doom. I was certain that some sort of disaster was on the horizon–”

“–something bad. Something unspeakable. And I would have helped make it happen–”

“–the fear never really went away. I’ve heard that being exposed to the source of your terror over and over again can help break its power over you, numb you to it, but in my experience it just teaches you to hide from it. Sometimes that might mean hiding in a quiet corner of your mind, but–”

"–soon enough, I could no longer fool myself–"

"–the calm I had been getting accustomed to had been torn away completely, and where it had been was just this horrible, ice-cold terror–"

"–that – we can't escape the ruins of our own future–"

"–a future where – humanity was violently and utterly supplanted, and wiped out by a new category of being–"

"–there are terrible things coming – things that, if we knew them, would leave us weak and trembling, with shuddering terror at the knowledge that they are coming for all of us–"

"–I think in my heart, I have been waiting for this moment. For the final axe to fall–"

"–we create the world in a lot of ways. I suppose it shouldn't be surprising that, when we're not being careful, we can change it–"

There's a breathless pause before Jon continues, in a nearly inaudible whisper: *"What could I have chosen to change? Would a different path have been possible?"*

"It is," Martin says firmly, "and we're on it. What happened last time won't happen again. We won't let it."

Jon doesn't acknowledge the reassurance.

"I should've known," he says with a quiet ferocity, in his own voice this time. "It was too peaceful. I should've known it wasn't going to last. And – and on some level I *did* know – I *knew* it wasn't over – but I just… I didn't want to be the one to shatter the illusion, I suppose." His expression goes taut. "Didn't much matter what I wanted, in the end. But I still should've seen it coming. Can't let my guard down again."

"How could you have known?" Martin doesn't intend for it to come out as exasperated. He tries to reel it back, to gentle his tone. "You've said yourself that you can't predict the future–"

"No, but I knew Jonah had plans for me. And I knew nothing good could come of feeding the Eye, but I kept on anyway."

“It’s not like you were doing it for *fun,* Jon! You needed it to survive, and Jonah took advantage of that. Or…” No – that makes it sound purely opportunistic, doesn’t it? In reality, it was all part of Jonah’s long game from the start. “He *made* you dependent on statements specifically *because* he wanted to take advantage of that.”

“I made choices,” Jon says tonelessly. “I can’t absolve myself of responsibility just because Jonah was nudging me in a particular direction.”

“You were *manipulated,*” Martin insists, “and I’m not having you apologize for surviving it. For *not* starving to death.”

“You don’t understand,” Jon says, growing more distressed, reaching up with both hands and tangling his fingers in his hair. “When that box of statements finally arrived, I… I couldn’t shoo you away fast enough. I was *hungry,* yes, but I wasn’t starving yet. I could’ve waited longer, but I just… I *wanted* one–”

“–should have fought harder against the temptation – but my curiosity was too strong–”

“You shouldn’t have to wait until you’re literally on death’s doorstep before you fulfill a *basic need*,” Martin interrupts.

“I should when that ‘basic need’ entails serving the Beholding,” Jon says heatedly. “And I – I should’ve *known* better – should’ve *known* not to jump headlong into the first statement that caught my eye. I’d known for a while that the Beholding leads me away from statements it doesn’t want me to know. It logically follows that it would lead me *towards* statements that would strengthen it. If I’d had any *sense,* I would’ve been suspicious of anything in that box that called out to me. It didn’t… it didn’t *feel* any different, but I – I suppose that somewhere along the line I just got used to… to wandering down whatever path I was led. I didn’t *think,* I never stop to *think–”*

“If anything, Jon, you *over*think. You’re overthinking right now.”

Martin has known for a long time now that Jon will latch onto the smallest details, allow his thoughts to branch into an impossible number of routes and tangents, and tie together loose

threads in countless permutations in the interest of considering all possible conclusions, no matter how outlandish. He will apply Occam's razor in one moment before tossing it into the bin, only to fish it out again: lather, rinse, repeat. His mind is a noisy, cluttered conspiracy corkboard, and he'll hang himself with red string if given half a chance, just to feel like he's in control of *something.*

"It's easy to look back and criticize your past self," Martin says, "but he didn't know what you do. If we knew the outcome to every action, maybe we wouldn't make mistakes, but we're only human–"

"Not all of us."

"–so we just have to do the best with what we have in the moment," Martin continues, paying no heed to Jon's grumbled comment. No good will come of guiding him down that rabbit trail right now. Anyway, Martin has a more pressing concern–

"Why didn't you tell me about any of this sooner?" he blurts out, immediately wincing at his lack of tact. "That came out wrong–"

"Why didn't I tell you how quick I was to chase you out of the house and sink my teeth into a statement the moment temptation presented itself?" Jon scoffs. "Because I'm ashamed. Why else?"

"No, not–" Martin scrubs a hand over his face. It's a struggle, sometimes, not to grab Jon by the shoulders and shake him until all of that stubborn self-loathing falls away. "About the fact that you've got a – a post-traumatic anniversary event coming up, I mean. You haven't been well, and I thought I understood why – thought it was just… all of it, in general. But here I come to find you've been agonizing over the upcoming date of the single worst day of your life–"

"One of the worst," Jon says quietly.

"What?"

“I didn’t lose you until much later.”

Martin’s breath catches in his throat at that, a sharp pang shooting through his chest.

“Well… you’ve got me now,” he says meekly. “So – so you don’t have to suffer in silence, is what I’m saying. What happened to you – no, what was *done to you* – it was horrible, and it wasn’t your fault. I know you don’t believe that, but it’s the truth.”

“Either I’ve always been caught up in someone else’s web, passively having things happen *to* me with no control over my life–”

“–the Mother got exactly the result she no doubt wanted, one that would lead to a fear – so acute that I could later have that horror focused and refined into a silk-spun apotheosis–”

Jon bites down on one knuckle, eyes shut tight as he waits for the compulsion to subside.

“Or,” he says after a minute, “or I *do* have control, and I *can* change the outcome, which makes me culpable. I don’t know which prospect I hate more. Which probably says some unflattering things about me.”

“It’s not that simple–”

“It *is,*” Jon says viciously. “If there *is* another path, then I should’ve found it last time!” He closes his eyes, pinches the bridge of his nose, and takes a steadying breath. When he speaks again, he’s no longer bordering on shouting, but there’s a quaver in his voice, a fragility that Martin finds more disconcerting than any flash of anger. “The way I see it, there are two options. One, what happened in my future was inevitable and nothing I could’ve done would’ve changed it – which certainly doesn’t bode well for *this* timeline. *Or,* the outcome *can* be changed, in which case my choices matter, and had I just made *better* choices, maybe I could have prevented all of this from ever happening in the first place.”

“You’re not being fair,” Martin says, his hands clenching into fists – but Jon isn’t listening.

“Doesn’t make much difference, I suppose. The consequences are the same either way–”

“–billions of – people making their way through life who had no idea what was right above their heads–”

“–would-be occult dynasties and ageless monsters–”

“–minds so strange and colossal that we would never know they were minds at all–”

“–idiots who destroyed themselves chasing a secret that wasn’t worth knowing–”

“–there, caught up in a series of events that I didn’t understand but that terrified me – I did the stupidest thing I’ve ever done–”

“–running was pointless. To try to escape from my task would only serve to fulfill another. I finally understood what I needed to do–”

“–I don’t know if you have ever drowned, but it’s the most painful thing I have ever experienced–”

“–I do not suppose I need to dwell on the pain, but please know that I would sooner die than endure it again–”

“Would you?” Martin says abruptly. Jon won’t look at him. “Jon, I need to know if you’re feeling like hurting yourself.”

“What would it matter if I was?” Jon *still* won’t look at him. “I’m categorically incapable of hurting myself in any way that matters.”

Martin blinks in disbelief. “Okay, that’s *blatantly* untrue.”

Jon has been a glaring portrait of self-neglect for as long as Martin has known him. That simple lack of consideration for himself, together with compounding survivor’s guilt, was the perfect stepping stone to active self-endangerment. Now that Jon’s convinced himself he’s invulnerable to a normal human death, he’s all the more careless with himself.

“I don’t want to die,” Jon whispers. “That’s the *problem*.”

“What—?”

“Before, I was unknowingly putting the entire world at risk by – by waking up after the Unknowing, by crawling out of the Buried, by escaping the Hunters, by continuing to read statements like it was – like it was something routine, as unremarkable as – as taking tea. Now, though – now I know better. I know what Jonah is planning, I *saw* what I’m capable of, and *still* I… I don’t want to die.”

“Well… good,” Martin says. “You should want to live–”

“It doesn’t much matter what I want–”

“–I never wanted to weigh up the value of a life, to set it on the scales against my own, but that’s a choice that I am forced into–”

“–doesn’t get to die for that – gets to live, trapped and helpless, and entombed forever – powerless–”

“–a lynchpin for this new ritual – a record of fear–”

Shit, Martin thinks the instant he recognizes the statement. It’s the worst of them all, virtually guaranteed to send Jon spiraling.

“–both in mind as you walk the shuddering record of each statement, and in body as the Powers each leave their mark upon you – a living chronicle of terror – a conduit for the coming of this – nightmare kingdom–”

“Okay, okay, stay with me–”

“–the Chosen One is simply that: someone I chose. It’s not in your blood, or your soul, or your destiny. *It’s just in your own, rotten luck–”*

“Jon, can you hear me? *Jon*–”

"–I'll admit, my options were somewhat limited, but my god, when you came to me already marked by the Web, I knew it had to be you. I even held out some small hope you had been sent by the Spider as some sort of implicit blessing on the whole project, and, do you know what, I think it was–"

Martin reaches over, taking both of Jon's hands in his own and squeezing tightly. The pressure seems to do the trick: lucidity sparks in Jon's eyes and he takes a deep, ragged breath, as if coming up for air.

"There you are. Are you okay?" Martin rubs both thumbs over the backs of Jon's hands in rhythmic, soothing motions. "Hey, it's–"

"I don't want your kindness!" Jon snaps, jerking backwards and snatching his hands out from Martin's grip.

Both of them lapse into a stunned silence. As mortification dawns on Jon's face, Martin can feel the color rising in his cheeks. It only takes a few seconds for the blood rushing in his ears to be drowned out by another voice.

Martin can remember with cutting clarity the days prior to his mother's departure to the nursing home. She had been in (somewhat) rare form, her already-short fuse dwindled down to nothing, sniping at him around the clock, full of caustic observations and spiteful accusations.

I don't want your help, she had sneered as she entered the cab, swatting his hand away.

It was one of the last things she ever said to him.

"Well, *tough,*" Martin bites out, "because you deserve it, and you never should've had to go without it, and you're not going to change my mind about that, so you may as well stop trying!"

“Martin, I – I – I’m sorry, I didn’t mean–”

He saw, Martin realizes all at once, his skin crawling with humiliation.

“I’m going to go make some tea,” Martin says, rising to his feet.

Jon reaches out a hand. “Martin–”

“I just need a breather, okay?” Martin says, a pleading note to his voice. His lungs are constricting, his chest is tightening, there’s a lump in his throat, and he *really* doesn’t want to have a panic attack in the tunnels – *or* in front of Jon. “I’m not – I’m not angry, okay, I just need some air.”

Jon opens his mouth, then immediately closes it, clutches his hands to his chest, and gives a tiny nod that Martin just barely glimpses before turning to flee.

“Stop crying,” Jon hisses at himself, furiously scrubbing at his face as the tears slide down his cheeks. *“Stop it.”*

He plasters the heels of his hands over his closed eyelids. It does nothing to stem the flow, only brings to mind images of pressing himself bodily against a door to hold it closed, only for the crack to continue widening, millimeter after millimeter, the flood on the other side trickling through the gap, rivulets swelling into rivers, frigid eddies biting at his ankles, a whitewater undertow threatening to drag him below the waves–

“Enjoying our own company, are we?”

Once, Jon might have been humiliated to be caught mid-breakdown, raw-voiced and puffy-eyed, especially by Peter Lukas of all people. Several lifetimes spent in thrall to cosmic

horrors have a way of putting things in perspective.

"What do *you* want?" Jon says with as much ire as he can muster.

Peter hums to himself, starting a slow, back-and-forth pace in front of Jon. "It occurred to me that I've been derelict in my duties as far as the Archives are concerned–"

"That's *just now* occurring to you?"

"–and, as such, I thought it was high time that I met the infamous Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute."

"Well," Jon scoffs, gesturing at himself, "you've met him."

"I must admit, I was expecting something a bit more… hm." Peter taps a finger against his lips. "Formidable."

"Sorry to disappoint." The scathing sarcasm is rendered pitiful by an ill-timed, involuntary sniffle. Jon can't bring himself to care.

"The state you're in, you hardly seem fit to work." A pause. "Have you ever considered taking some time off?"

"A six-months hospital stay has a way of eating up your PTO, oddly enough. I'm told that payroll has already had to make special exceptions for my 'unprecedented' circumstances." Jon chuckles to himself. "On multiple occasions. Did you know the Institute considers a kidnapping in the line of duty to be an 'unexcused absence?'"

"I think you'll find that Elias and I have different management styles," Peter says mildly. "I'm open to making allowances – particularly since your department can function so smoothly in your absence. Your assistants have proven themselves to be quite capable of

working independently. In fact, seeing as your approach to supervision borders on *fraternization,* I imagine they would be more productive without excess drama to distract them."

"I'll take that into consideration," Jon says acerbically.

"No need," Peter says with a wave of his hand. "It's not a suggestion, Archivist. It's an order."

There was a time, not long ago, when sneaking up on the Archivist would have been difficult. Only Helen had consistently managed to ambush him, and that was because she didn't waste time *sneaking* – she manifested and launched the jump scare in the same instant, giving him no chance to See her approach. Readjusting to a binocular point of view has been a process, but rarely does he find himself yearning for the panoramic field of vision that had been foisted upon him during the apocalypse.

Occasionally, though, there are moments when 360° sight would come in handy. Too late, Jon realizes this is one of those moments.

By the time he notices the tendrils of encroaching fog, they're already curling around from behind him, pooling at his feet, ghosting across the back of his neck, affixing themselves around his wrists.

"It's alright," Peter says placidly, almost soothingly. "You can let go now."

Jon shivers as his heart pumps ice through his veins, fingers and toes going numb as he struggles for breath.

No. No, no, no, no, no–

"I am not Lonely anymore," Jon gasps out through chattering teeth.

“No,” Peter says with an air of nonchalance. Then he smiles, sharp and cold and cruel and the only detail Jon can still discern through the fog. “But you will be.”

Chapter End Notes

Daisy: hey siri, google what to do if i suspect my bff has been possessed by the ghost of a fussy paleornithologist
Jon: why are you booing me? i’m right

—

- Pretty sure this is the longest chapter yet? I could’ve split it into two, but, uh. I like that cliffhanger where it is. :3c (Sorry for that, btw.)

- Quite a bit of Archive-speak this chapter. Citations as follows:
Section 1: 122/124/011/007/047/155. The Xiaoling quote is from MAG 105; the Jonah quote is from 160; the Naomi quote is from 013.
Section 3: 181.
Section 5: 058 x2; 144/130/086/143/121/149/134/144/143/069; 147; 017; 147; 057/160/106/111/067/121/129/098; 155/128/160; 160 x3.
Section 6: 170, of course.

- I’m taking wild liberties with Pu Songling Research Centre’s whole deal. I’m conceptualizing their spookier departments as being actually academia-oriented, instead of “local Victorian corpse with illusions of godhood throws a bunch of traumatized nerds with no relevant archival experience into a basement, what happens next will shock you”.
Xiaoling is out here like “our digitization is still a work in progress, I’m sure you know how it is” and Jon Sims is like “digitization who? i don’t know her”. (Listen, he tried once. Tape recorder was haunted, he got kidnapped a bunch, there were worms and things, he died (he got better), his boss used him as a battering ram to open a door to hell – it was a lot.)

- Likewise, we didn’t get much info about Sonja in canon, so I’m having fun envisioning her as a certified Force To Be Reckoned With (& a bit of a Mama Bear wrt her assistants). Most of the Institute is leery of the Archives but Sonja’s seen a lot of shit and Jon Sims doesn’t even rank on her list of Top Spooky Things.

- re: the statement – it’s not clear in-text, but I want to clarify that I’m not conceptualizing Francis Drake as being influenced by the Hunt. Fictionalizing aspects of history is tricky, and I’d feel personally uncomfortable chalking up Drake’s real life atrocities to supernatural influence.
In the case of this particular fictional member of his crew, he was (like Drake’s real-life

crew) complicit in following Drake's orders for entirely mundane reasons and was only marked by the Hunt at the point in his statement where he first recounts hearing the Hunt chasing after him.

- At some point in writing this chapter, I had 137 tabs open in my browser for Research Purposes and like 20 of those were bc my dumb ass seriously considered writing that statement in Elizabethan English before going "what are you THINKING."
If I'd tried, it would have come off as inauthentic at best, if not ridiculous, bc I'm unfamiliar with English linguistic trends of the 1500s, & I'd be badly mimicking Shakespearean English, which isn't necessarily indicative of how everyone spoke at the time, & I don't know what colloquial speech would look like for this particular unnamed character I trotted out as exposition fodder, & it was probably unnecessary to formulate a whole-ass personal history for him for the sake of Historical Realism for a single section of a single chapter of a fanfic, and…
I decided that this pseudo-immortal rando can tell his life story in modernized English, as a treat (to me) (& also to those of you who don't think of slogging through bastardized Elizabethan prose as a good time).

- Speaking of research – shoutout to this dissertation that had an English translation of the Herla story in Walter Map's *De nugis curialium*. If you want to read the whole story, you can find it on pages 16-18 of that paper.
I feel it's important for you all to know that IMMEDIATELY after Map dramatically proclaims, *"the dog has not yet alighted, and the story says that this King Herla still holds on his mad course with his band in eternal wanderings, without stop or stay,"* he goes on to say in the next breath "buuuut some people say they all jumped into the River Wye, so ymmv. ¯_ (ツ)_/¯ Can I interest you in more Fucked Up If True tales?"
(Herla throwing the dog into the river wasn't in the original story though. I made that part up.)

- I used this guide to help me figure out how to format the catalogue entries. (All of that authors' work skin tutorials are great.)

- Thank you so much for reading! <3

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

- **ETA 11/02/21:** ALMOST DONE NEXT CHAPTER I SWEAR. The last scene is giving me a lot of trouble (Peter Lukas is the bane of my existence this whole next chapter I s2g) but I'm getting there. ☝️

Lost

Chapter Notes

I'M ALIIIIIIIIIIVE (enough)

Content warnings for Chapter 30: a ton of Lonely-typical content (isolation, fear of abandonment); lots of negative self-talk and guilty thought spirals (Jon- and Martin-typical abysmal self-esteem and insecurities, basically); a bit of Jonah POV; Peter and Jonah both being canon- and fic-typical manipulative assholes; mental confusion and (temporary) memory loss (think MAG 170); flashbacks to the apocalypse; recollections of parental neglect/rejection/emotional abuse (Martin's mother).

Let me know if I missed anything!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jon opens his eyes to find himself – *shockingly* – alone.

All around him stretches a vast expanse of stark, blank *nothingness*. No horizon, no ground, no sky. No sand, no beach, no gentle crash of waves. Though he can feel a chill mist clinging to every inch of exposed skin, it's invisible against the empty, blinding-white backdrop encapsulating him. Every shallow breath feels like frostbite in his lungs, but if he's exhaling fog, he can't see that, either.

As he begins to move tentatively forward, his footfalls produce no sound. The only thing he can hear is his own heart beating rabbit-quick in his ears, and even that is muffled beneath the weighted blanket of cloying silence pressing down on him.

Until–

A cacophonous roll of thunder rattles Jon to his bones, bringing on a full-body flinch. When he opens his eyes seconds later, he finds himself confronted by a towering wall of crumbling brick and rusted iron bars, stretching up and up and up and *up*–

“No,” Jon mouths soundlessly, shaking his head – in slow disbelief at first, then with frantic denial, eyes squeezed shut, arms wrapped vicelike around himself, fingers digging into his sides. *“No–”*

Without his say, his eyes snap open again.

He’s at the foot of the central observation tower now.

He cannot look away.

It’s not real, he tells himself. *It’s not real, it’s not real, it’s not real–*

Involuntarily, he takes a step forward.

And another,

and another,

and another…

Until he’s standing before the Watcher’s throne. Empty, like everything else in this place. Beckoning him forward.

Finally, he is permitted to blink, banishing the sight. His taut, trembling muscles ease up all at once. Grasping desperately at that slackened inch of the puppet string, he stumbles backwards, nearly tripping over his own feet in the process.

He doesn’t dare open his eyes as he turns and flees into the frigid, fog-swamped void.

“Who here drinks oolong?” Martin mutters to himself, knocking the box aside as he rummages through the breakroom cabinets. He locates a box of Earl Grey, only to scowl when he checks its contents. “And who keeps leaving empty boxes in here?”

When he tosses the offending box at the bin, it bounces off the side and onto the floor. Rather than retrieve it and discard it properly, he jabs a spiteful finger at the electric kettle, switching it off.

It’s not like he even *wants* tea. It’s just that the process of *making* tea is the most reliable self-soothing ritual he knows. Given how badly his hands are shaking, it was probably a futile endeavor in the first place. Not to mention, if it *has* been a full week since Jon’s last statement, Jon might not be able to stomach tea, anyway.

Gritting his teeth in frustration, Martin leans on the counter, his sweaty palms tacky on its surface.

One would think that, given his track record of failed attempts at caregiving, he would know when to back off. His mother certainly admonished him enough. He was always intruding, suffocating her with concern that wasn’t wanted, making an annoyance of himself in his misguided desire to fix something that couldn’t *be* fixed, to make himself useful in a situation that *had* no solution–

I don’t want your kindness.

Martin is no stranger to Jon’s vitriol. In those early days working in the Archives, Martin had largely become inured to it, given its regularity – especially once Martin realized just how much of Jon’s irascibility came down to insecurity, haphazardly projected outward onto the nearest scapegoat. But it’s been *so long* since Martin found himself on the receiving end, and he had forgotten how small it could make him feel. As surly as Jon has been these days, no matter how snippy he gets, it’s never personal. Never so *incisive.*

Except… the more Jon’s voice echoes in Martin’s head, rather than cut deeper with every iteration, the words gradually lose their sting. Martin allows himself to mull over the hurt, like prodding at a bumped head to feel for the nascent bruise. On closer examination, he finds none of the offhand disdain that had once been the hallmark of their interactions. It’s

certainly devoid of the personal resentment and conscious desire to wound that he had come to expect from his mother.

Because Jon isn't like her, Martin thinks.

His mother didn't want his kindness because she hated him for things that weren't his fault, that he couldn't control.

But Jon… Jon doesn't want *any* kindness. Because he hates *himself* for things that aren't his fault.

It's nothing to do with me, Martin thinks – and, yeah, that stings a bit. It's an open-ended statement of fact that could branch into myriad uncharitable avenues, veering dangerously close to a minefield of stale criticisms with which Martin is well-acquainted. It's all too easy to twist the words into distorted shape like putty in his hands. He could tack a seemingly-innocuous *because* onto it and follow that up with any number of cherry-picked insecurities that catch his eye: *because you don't matter; because you can do nothing; because you* are *nothing–*

It's nothing to do with him, and yet here he is, making it about him.

That's not what Jon meant, Martin reminds himself, plucking at that weed of a thought before it can flourish. The roots are a problem for later. For now, it's enough to just… redirect.

"It's nothing to do with me." Full stop. A simple statement of fact containing multitudes. Martin pauses, letting that treacherous *because* sit on the tip of his tongue for a moment, feeling its weight. Then he imagines scratching it out, like a word in a poem that doesn't quite *fit.* He pictures a word bank scribbled in the margins of his mind: *and; also; however; still; although…*

But, he decides on. A precise seam to marry two competing yet compatible statements of fact: *It's nothing to do with me, but that doesn't mean I have to look the other way.*

It's not like Jon hasn't adopted that same approach. The Lonely was Martin's problem, not Jon's, but still Jon insisted on intervening, because he cared. *Cares.* Present-tense. Isn't it only fair if Martin follows the same playbook? If he insinuates himself between Jon and that all-too-relatable tendency towards self-isolation, even if it *does* mean making a bit of a nuisance of himself in the process?

"Right," Martin sighs, straightening up and rubbing a tired hand over his face. "Okay."

He gives himself another minute for his nerves to settle before making his way back to the tunnels.

"Fascinating," comes a voice, distant and detached and *smug*–

And painfully, hatefully welcome.

"Peter–" The echo of Jon's own voice cuts him off, as if the sound bounced off an invisible barrier before it could reach another's ear. The rest of his sentence, whatever it was meant to be, perishes in his throat.

"I can't say I like what you've done with the place," Peter says. Hoping to catch a glimpse of him, Jon scans the area, to no avail. He can only judge Peter's position from the barely-there sound of his footsteps, circling like a shark.

On every side, all Jon can see through the mist is the burnt-out husk of what may once have been a city street. Whatever rubble might have littered the area has been eroded by time and bracing winds, leaving behind only fragmentary debris. A deposit of fine particulate covers the ground, occasionally caught up by a rogue gust of stale air and swept into miniature dust devils around Jon's feet.

Something in his chest wrenches painfully at the sight.

“I did this,” Jon says before he can think better of it – so faintly that it should have been inaudible, but still the words reverberate on the breeze, carrying only a short distance before ricocheting back to crowd him once more. He swears he can *feel* them pressing in on him, clamoring to burrow beneath his skin, to force their way down his throat, to spin a cocoon there and lie in wait.

“Yes, you did.” Peter hums to himself. “In a way. The Lonely can shape itself to reflect its subject. It typically mirrors a real place – or the memory of one.”

Jon freezes. *Does he know–?*

“This is the first I’ve ever seen a *nightmare* used as a backdrop,” Peter continues. Jon can feel his shoulders slacken ever so slightly with relief. “I take it you’ve been feeding on those Extinction statements. Elias did say that the Archivist’s dreams are a sight to behold. Vivid as a waking memory. It must be a very lonely experience, watching on with no means of connecting.”

“Yes,” Jon murmurs, playing along as best he can. It’s not difficult; it’s only a statement of truth. If he can just goad Peter into showing himself… “Did Elias put you up to this? Was the Buried not enough, he felt the need to test me again?”

“I don’t work for *Elias*,” Peter scoffs. “No, you’ve become a thorn in my side, Archivist.”

“Well, I don’t know what Elias needs me for, but I doubt he’ll be pleased if you take me out of play.”

“Oh, Archivist.” Peter chuckles softly, with all of the indulgent amusement of a longsuffering elder correcting a childish notion. “Have you ever considered that maybe you’re just not as significant as you presume?”

“I can’t believe he’d wander off on his own.”

“I can,” Daisy snorts.

Martin stares daggers at her. “Can you be serious for a minute?”

“Right.” Daisy shakes her head. “Sorry. If he didn’t go upstairs, then that just leaves the tunnels.”

“Yeah, that really narrows it down. There are only so many places someone can go in a *massive labyrinth.*”

Daisy, to her credit, doesn’t stoop to matching Martin’s foul temper.

“You said you weren’t upstairs for long, right? He was using his cane last I saw him.”

“His leg was bothering him this morning,” Martin says absently, preoccupied with the sight of the three-way fork looming ahead of them.

“Which means he can’t have gotten too far.” Daisy nods and starts off down the leftmost offshoot. If there’s any reasoning behind her choice, she doesn’t share it.

They continue to walk through the tunnel in silence, save for the occasional inquiring call of Jon’s name whenever they pass a new corridor branching off from their current path. Martin opts to follow Daisy’s lead. It's slow going, with Daisy's stiff gait and need to brace herself with one hand against the tunnel wall for balance as she walks, but her focus does not falter. Privately – somewhat guiltily – he hopes that a Hunter’s instinct is guiding her.

“I just…” Martin sighs after several minutes have passed without success. “I *really* didn’t think he’d go off on his own. Thought he was done with that sort of thing.”

“He probably just needed some alone time, yeah? Chances are he was feeling restless and decided to map the tunnel system some more to make himself feel useful.”

That does *sound like him,* Martin thinks to himself. Jon has always defaulted to overwork and risk-taking as a response to stress – partly as a distraction, yes, but also as overcompensation, by his own admission. When he’s feeling guilty, that impulse only gets worse. These days, it seems like he’s ruled by guilt.

Still…

“We’re supposed to go in pairs,” Martin grumbles.

“It’s *Jon*,” Daisy says, just a tad wryly. “He’s not one for doing what he’s told.”

“I – I know that, but… it’s been *hours.* He should’ve been back by now. He can’t have accidentally gotten lost with all the trail markers we’ve left down here.”

“Maybe his leg gave out?” Martin’s heart sinks at the budding uncertainty in Daisy’s voice. His argumentative impulse aside, he was hoping for continued pushback on her part. “He *did* leave his cane behind, and if he was already having a flare-up–”

“Exactly.” Martin twists the hem of his jumper in his hands. He’s probably stretching the fabric. He can’t bring himself to care. “Why would he have left it? And – and if he *did* decide to explore on his own, he would’ve taken the map with him too, right?”

“Should’ve, yeah,” Daisy says, sounding more apprehensive by the minute.

“He… he’s been so vocal about all of us cooperating, you know? And mostly – mostly he’s been following through on that.”

“Yeah, well… he’s been out of sorts lately.” Daisy rubs the back of her neck, an uncomfortable expression on her face. “Closed off.”

“This whole time I thought it was *stress,* or – that’s an understatement, obviously, but – you know what I mean.”

“Yeah. It would be weird if he *wasn’t* tying himself in knots. That’s… kind of his baseline already, and then with everything else going on–”

“Wait, did you know?” Martin blurts out.

“Know what?”

“Where he came from, the world ended this month. *That’s* what he’s been agonizing over the last few weeks.”

Daisy stops in her tracks. “Oh.”

“What?”

“I – I wasn’t even *thinking*–”

“So you *knew?”* Martin sputters, incredulity teetering on the edge of indignation. Sure, Jon and Daisy are *close,* but does he really confide in her so readily? Martin’s been *right here* the whole time. In the end he’d practically had to pry the explanation out of Jon, and look how well *that* went–

“No, I – he hasn’t said anything about that.” Daisy grips one wrist with the opposite hand, squeezing tightly enough to blanch her already-pallid skin. “Not recently. Just – I asked him once when I went back to the Hunt in his timeline, and he told me September, and he’s said before that the world ended a few weeks after… all of that, but I just – I’ve been so

preoccupied about what happened to *me* last time that I didn't think, didn't put two and two together–"

"Are you telling me you've been brooding over the *same exact thing* for the last few weeks? And you didn't *tell* anyone?"

Daisy has a penchant for raising up a wall the instant something so much as brushes a nerve, and this time is no different. As if to underscore the boundary, she crosses her arms and does a quarter-turn, angling her body away.

"Jon told me about what happened, but it's not like I lived it," she says, pointedly refusing to meet Martin's eye. "It's not a memory. Not like it is for him."

"We're supposed to be *communicating!* How are we supposed to take care of each other if no one is actually *talking* about things?"

"Who am I supposed to talk to?" Daisy counters. "Basira's been focused on her mission, Jon's in his own head, and I'm not about to make *you* sort through my baggage with me. Anyway, it's my own fault."

"You're both so–" Martin groans. "What were you *thinking?* Going it alone when the Lonely's got a hold on this place – with *Peter* lurking around–" Aggravated, he plants the heel of his hand on his forehead and exhales heavily. "God, what was *I* thinking? I never should've left Jon alone, not when he was in such a bad place."

"So were you, sounds like." Now that she's no longer the focus of the conversation, some of Daisy's aloofness melts away, her tone losing its prior harsh edge. "It's not wrong to need some quiet from time to time."

"I *had* quiet – *months'* worth of it. I shouldn't need it. I'm *tired* of needing it."

“It’s not… it doesn’t have to be a Lonely thing, does it? It’s normal, to need to step away sometimes. It’s not the same as isolating yourself, it’s just… giving yourself a minute to unwind. Better than saying something you’ll regret, yeah?”

“That’s not–” Martin lets out a clipped, impatient huff. “I should be there when he needs me. I… I wasn’t there when he woke up.”

And he wasn’t there when Jon was in hiding, accused of a murder he didn’t commit. Or when every other Avatar in the greater London area was adding to his collection of scars. Or *any* of the times he was kidnapped – when the Circus had him – when they had him for an entire *month* and Martin didn’t know–

Of course, if Jon had only reached out while he was on the lam, Martin would have helped without hesitation – but it wasn’t Martin that Jon went to. Of the three separate times Jon was kidnapped, Martin never knew until after the fact. Never even knew Jon was *missing,* given how scarce he’d been at the time, always off in the field pursuing leads on his own.

But after the Unknowing? Jon was in hospital. Martin knew where he was at all times. He could’ve kept visiting. Could’ve been there when Jon woke up. Could’ve sought him out at any time before he went into that Coffin.

“Last time,” Martin says, “last time I wasn’t there for him *at all.* I – I abandoned him. For *Peter.* And I didn’t come to my senses until Jon had to – to get marked by the Lonely coming in after me. It was the last mark Jonah needed for his plan to work, and it happened because of me.”

“Okay, I *know* that’s not how Jon described it,” Daisy says. “He doesn’t think of it that way, and he doesn’t hold it against you. Besides, that wasn’t *you.* Not this version of you, anyway.”

“Doesn’t matter. He remembers it, and…”

And it still *hurts*.

Martin has seen it: when Jon wakes up from a nightmare disorientated, when his increasingly frequent waking bouts of dissociation lead him to forget where or *when* he is, there are moments. Moments when he's surprised to see Martin in front of him. Jon will freeze in place, his eyes wide with disbelieving, nigh-terrified wonder, as if Martin is a too-good-to-be-true mirage that might disappear if Jon dares to blink or reach out or acknowledge Martin's presence in the slightest. It's heartbreaking to witness, that stricken look in his eye – as if he's poised on the verge of having his hopes dashed, reliving every minute he's spent longing and grieving and second-guessing.

It never lasts long, but the reaction is visceral enough for Martin to know that even when Jon is fully lucid and present, that fear of abandonment is still *there,* not quite subconscious, waiting for the worst to happen.

To happen *again.*

"He was alone for so long," Martin says in a pained whisper. "He lost *everyone,* and he's so afraid of–"

Martin's breath catches in his throat.

"What?" Daisy tenses as she senses Martin's shift in demeanor. "What is it?"

"I – I need to find Peter."

Between his first foray into the Lonely, its wide variety of domains he walked through at the end of the world, and the countless victim statements he's encountered – spoken and written and witnessed in real time – Jon has ample experience by now to cobble together a traveler's guide to traversing Forsaken places.

Number one: keep moving. Remain stationary for too long and one becomes rooted to the ground, slumped in despair, reduced to nothing more than a moss-covered stone to serve as a catatonic waypoint for the next forsaken traveler – if anything at all. It might seem counterintuitive at first glance: a person who never settles in one place might manage to avoid the attachments and sense of belonging that the Forsaken abhors. But in a place where there are no attachments to be found, putting down roots is a good way to become lost.

Number two, he reminds himself: "Keep talking."

The Lonely has a way of muting even the loudest voice. Even the echoes are subdued, as if one's own self is insurmountably distant, as impossible to locate as another – *any* other – person. Still, whispers are better than silence. Silence can drain a lost traveler of will just as effectively as staying in place – if not more so.

Number three, and arguably the most important thing to remember–

"You're not Lonely," he tells himself, projecting his voice as best he can. "You have–"

"*–friends – you didn't choose to be here–"*

"–and Martin is – he's waiting, probably–"

"–if I forget him – maybe – maybe there's nothing left to Know. No one to find–"

Jon chokes on his words.

"No," he says, shaking his head vigorously. "That is *not* helping."

Shivering, he picks up the loose thread of his mantra as he staggers onward: "You're not Lonely. You have friends. They – they're probably worried right about now. You" – Jon chuckles to himself – "you've *really* got to stop disappearing like this."

He's bound to get an earful if – "When," he corrects aloud – he gets back. He wonders who will corner him first. What they'll say. Hopefully he hasn't been gone long enough for them

to alert Georgie. She and Martin wouldn't even fight for the honor, they'd just team up for the lecture session.

It's probably pathetic, fondly fantasizing about his loved ones taking turns chastising him, but it helps, to fill his head with friendly voices. At least until the daydream takes a steep turn for the wistful, and then dissolves entirely as a stern reminder shoves its way to the forefront:

It's easy to imagine because it's so commonplace. You're always worrying them. Always at the center of a crisis. Always making things difficult.

Whether it comes from the Lonely itself or from Jon's own mind, he doesn't know. Either way, it's true.

"So what if it is?" He still can't manage more than a whisper, but it's at least louder than whatever hackneyed recriminations that cynical inner voice wants to dole out. "People worry because they care." He doesn't know who told him that. Georgie, maybe. Or Martin. Could've been either of them; he can hear it in both of their voices. "Make it up to them by finding the way out. You've done it before. So *keep. Moving.*"

Georgie paces to and fro, gnawing at the edge of her thumbnail as she takes in the situation. "What about the Hunters?"

"They wouldn't bother taking him," Daisy says. "They'd just kill him. And… we'd know if that happened. We wouldn't still be bound to this place."

"That is *not* Jon's fault," Martin says, incensed.

There's a slightly wounded overtone to Daisy's voice when she replies, "You know I didn't mean it like that."

His ire fading just as quickly as it kindled, Martin mumbles an apology.

"So that just leaves Peter," Georgie says.

"Yeah," Martin says, rubbing at his face with both hands. "I should've realized from the start. He made some veiled threats awhile back. He must've finally decided to follow through."

"Right." Georgie nods, her lips set in a grim line. "So what do we do about it?"

"I don't *know*," Martin says helplessly. "I don't know where Peter is. There's no way for me to contact him. His Institute email is just a formality; he doesn't actually use it. Usually I'm the one who deals with his inbox. I don't know if he even knows how to check it on his own, honestly. I just have to wait for him to show up, and he only does that on *his* terms. And not often – which" – Martin lets out a bitter laugh – "normally I'd say good riddance, but–"

"Well, I doubt just taking Jon is his endgame," Georgie says. "He can't win his bet with Jonah that way. He needs you. Which means sooner or later he'll have to show his face."

"And we're supposed to, what, just – just *wait?"* Martin sputters. "Leave Jon in the Lonely until Peter's good and ready?"

"I don't know that we have a choice," Georgie says gently. Judging from her expression, she's just as torn up about that as Martin is. "Jon found his way out of the Lonely last time, right? Maybe he'll do it again."

"It didn't take him *days* last time–"

"Because he had you with him," Daisy says quietly, her chin tucked to her chest. "Escaping the Lonely's probably harder when you're… well – alone. Doesn't mean he won't, it's just… I mean, if I went back into the Buried now, even knowing how to get out, I don't know if I'd be able to do it without help."

“We need a game plan for when Peter shows up,” Georgie says. “I think it’s safe to assume he’s planning on making a deal.”

“Jon’s freedom for Martin’s cooperation,” Daisy says.

“Yeah, and that’s not an option.” Georgie catches Martin’s eye and for an uncomfortable moment, he feels trapped under her scrutiny. Even when he manages to break away, he can still feel her eyes boring into him. “I mean it. Jon would never forgive himself. If he loses you, I… honestly don’t know if he’d recover from that. He barely did the first time. The way he told it, it took him *ages* to pull himself together enough to take action. We lose you, we might lose him, too.” She sighs. “Even if we didn’t, it’s still not right for you to throw your life away. Frankly, you *both* need to stop seeing your own lives as less valuable than the other’s. You probably don’t want to hear this, but – that sort of codependency, it gets toxic fast.”

“Well, I’m not leaving him there,” Martin counters.

“No, we’re not,” Georgie agrees. “But I’m not interested in a scenario where *either one* of you is a sacrificial lamb. You have more leverage than you might think–”

“I’m *aware*,” Martin says, tipping his head back and glaring at the ceiling. “We’ve already established that Peter needs me to voluntarily choose the Lonely. He can’t just take me like he – like he did Jon.”

“Exactly,” Georgie says, unshaken by Martin’s sharp tone.

Just as quickly as the irritation surfaced, guilt bubbles back up to take its place. Martin’s voice wavers when he says, “That’s *why* he took Jon in the first place–”

“So change the rules of the game,” Georgie cuts in. “Make him play on *your* terms. Peter’s a gambler, right? Shouldn’t be too difficult to convince him to give you a chance to save both of you.”

“He’s going to demand the same stakes in return,” Daisy points out. “If he wins, he’ll take both of them.”

“At least we’d be together,” Martin says.

“You wouldn’t, though,” Daisy says. “Not like the Lonely’s going to allow visitation. You’d just be alone in the same place.”

“Better than doing nothing just to survive alone here. Yeah, yeah, I know,” Martin says when he sees Georgie tense in his periphery, “that’s not a healthy mindset. But that’s where I am. I went through that once already. I’m not doing it again.”

Whatever protest was on Georgie’s lips, she swallows it with a resigned sigh.

“Then don’t,” she says instead. “The two of you beat Peter at his own game before, and this time you have a better hand. I know you can do it, but you can’t go in with a self-sacrificial mindset, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” Martin says. Judging from the stern look Georgie gives him, she doesn’t appreciate being blown off.

“Martyrdom isn’t the only way forward, you know.” Martin grimaces, but Georgie doesn’t back down. “You can do better than that.”

Georgie pauses, watching Martin expectantly, searchingly. Something about the intensity of her sincerity leaves him speechless. She barely knows him; why should she be so invested?

Because of Jon, comes the knee-jerk assumption, but that doesn’t sound quite right. *Because she’s kind,* he amends, which feels closer to the truth. Except… she can also be brutally honest, can’t she? Sometimes out of kindness, sometimes out of ignorance, and, yes,

sometimes out of anger, because she's only human. Sometimes a cocktail of those and more, because even the most compassionate soul is capable of a sharp tongue, given the right series of provocations. He's heard Jon and Melanie both tease her about it, and as much as Georgie rolls her eyes and responds with playful accusations of her own, Martin has never heard her deny the charge.

Because she means what she says, then, Martin settles on.

"You *deserve* better than that," Georgie continues. "Both of you. Do you understand?"

"Yeah." It comes out as little more than a croak. Martin clears his throat and then tries again, more audibly this time: "Yeah."

One of the benefits of a preternaturally long life is having ample time to practice one's poker face. Jonah would never claim to be *immune* to such prosaically human emotions as disappointment and frustration, but he does pride himself on keeping those petty sentiments in check. Typically, that means projecting calm and self-assurance. Sometimes, it means putting on a performance: masquerading as useless in an emergency, feigning ignorance to entice his pawns with an unanswered question, losing a series of bets to string along a promising mark, allowing his composure to slip to give a rival the illusion of control. Indeed, were he not so repulsed by the idea of submitting to a greater puppeteer, Jonah may well have been a fitting understudy for the Web.

There are times, though. Times when his forbearance is tested to the razor's edge of its limits.

So it is that he cannot entirely suppress the incensed tremor in his voice when looks Peter in the eye and says, word by measured word, "You forfeit the game?"

"No," Peter replies. "I've simply upped the stakes."

“You were meant to *mark* him,” Jonah seethes, sharp and deadly, “not remove him from play.”

“If I can recruit one of your pawns for the Forsaken, the Panopticon is mine. If I can’t, I bring your Archivist one step closer to the pinnacle. That was the deal. You never outlined rules of engagement.”

“You chose Martin Blackwood–”

“We never agreed that my choice was binding.” Peter pauses for effect. “But he *is* still my first choice. I’m simply… taking a new tack. You were right that the Archivist is the perfect bait, but bait only works so long as it’s *just* out of reach. Martin is well-suited for my patron. He simply needs reminding of that.”

Whether Peter realizes it or not, the timing for this petty little stunt couldn’t be more inconvenient. Conjuring up a conceit to lure Basira away from the Institute was straightforward enough – clever though she may be, she can be single-minded in achieving a goal once she’s set her sight on it. Should she retrieve the artefact she seeks, though, and it does prove to be effective in stabilizing her partner’s condition, the element of desperation that has been driving Basira up until now will be lifted. Coming up with another compelling distraction could prove challenging.

Not *impossible,* of course. But there’s something uniquely vexing about being forced to admit that one has overplayed one’s hand, and even more so about realizing that one has succumbed to the same pitfall twice.

Because this will be the *second* time that his Archivist has managed to evade a mark – the *same* mark at that – and through no effort of his own.

“The terms haven’t changed,” Peter says. “Your prize remains the same, as does mine. Your Archivist may be marked, but he’s of no use to you where he is now. If you win, you can have him.”

“Martin needs to *willingly* choose your patron. This is *coercion*,” Jonah hisses. “You’re as good as putting a gun to his head.”

“Seems a bit late to arbitrate the concept of free will. Is it my fault you didn’t define ‘coercion’ in the fine print?”

“Because I would think it *obvious.*” *And because you’re predictable,* Jonah fumes silently. “I didn’t think you would bring a *cannon* to a gentleman’s duel.”

“It seems you’ve miscalculated. It wouldn’t be the first time, would it?”

“You are playing a *very* dangerous game,” Jonah warns.

“The higher the stakes, the more satisfying the win.”

Jonah draws a deep breath in through his nose, willing himself to remain calm.

“And do you plan on keeping my Archivist ferreted away inside the Forsaken if you win?” he asks evenly. “That was *not* part of our deal. I agreed to give you the Institute, not the Archivist.”

“I would think the Archivist would be included.”

“The Archivist belongs to the Eye, not to the Institute.”

“Hm.” Peter paces a few steps to the left, then to the right. “Come to think of it, I *do* like him right where he is. It won’t do to have you complete your Ritual before I get another chance at mine, after all, and with the Archivist out of play… well, that should be a significant setback, I would think.” He rubs his chin in mock thoughtfulness. “Say, can you even replace him while he still lives?”

Peter might have a decent poker face himself, but Jonah has no trouble seeing through the bluff.

“Don’t insult my intelligence, Peter. I *know* you. You have no desire to draw this out indefinitely. You’re itching to go back to wallowing on that boat of yours.”

The slight lands, judging from the way Peter’s lips twist in displeasure. It’s a gift, how easily riled he is where the *Tundra* is concerned.

“It doesn’t need to be indefinite,” Peter says, swiftly recovering his composure. “Just long enough to make an impression.” His lip curls again, this time into his trademark self-satisfied smirk. “Speaking of which, it’s been some time since I last looked in on him. Perhaps I should make some time in my schedule for a check-in.”

Jon needs to keep moving. He knows this. But every step forward *hurts,* as if his joints are frozen solid, shattering as he forces them to bend.

“You have people waiting for you,” he whispers with some difficulty, his voice having long since grown hoarse. No great loss, really. Years have passed since he last felt any true ownership over it, he thinks. “You have people–”

“Are you sure about that? Do you even know how long you’ve been here?”

Jon whips around so abruptly that his spine audibly protests, crackling like ice under pressure.

There’s no one there.

“You don’t, do you?” comes the voice again. Jon strains his eyes, but he can’t see anything through the mist. *Or maybe there’s just nothing* to *see*, the stale air seems to whisper knowingly, almost kindly. “Well, Archivist? Aren’t you curious?”

“I… I don’t…” Jon runs his tongue over his chapped lips as he struggles to shuffle his thoughts into order.

“Remember? Of course not.” A soft, approving chuckle. “You really do take to it.”

“What–?”

“It’s almost a shame that it wasn’t *my* patron you crossed paths with first.”

“Who–”

“The Web, wasn’t it?” the voice carries on. “The Spider tangled you up, picked you apart, abandoned the leftovers on the Beholding’s doorstep. Truly a waste. With such a lonely upbringing, you would have done just as well with The One Alone. Better, even. It would have at least done you the courtesy of *keeping* you.”

A full minute of silence passes before Jon manages to seize on a coherent thought.

“Peter,” he says, the syllables unwieldy on his tongue, caught between his teeth like rust between gears – and then, with an abrupt burst of clarity: “Lukas.”

“There we are.”

An anxious knot writhes in Jon’s chest as he tries to make sense of his… well – predicament, he supposes. The particulars of his situation remain fuzzy, but he has enough sense to know that his circumstances aren’t *favorable* by any stretch of the imagination. Every time he tries

to retrace his steps, though – to recall how he ended up here, to fathom where *here* even is – the details slip further and further away, like sand through an hourglass.

There is one thing he knows: he needs to See. The *why* remains elusive, but the *how* is instinctual, and the conviction is unshakeable.

"Peter Lukas," he says, ***"show–"***

"None of that, now," Peter tuts. "You were coming along so well. Seems you need more time to settle."

"N-no, wait, I–"

Jon's protest shudders to a halt as more fog billows up around him. The cold rushes back in, and along with it the crushing realization that no one is listening, and nothing is watching, and there is nothing to see.

"You're sure about this?" Basira says. "Maybe he just… left the building."

Luckily they have Basira on speaker; hopefully Martin is far enough away from the phone that she doesn't hear his aggravated sigh.

They've had this same exchange multiple times over the past couple of days. Although the skepticism is starting to grate, Martin knows that she's not being contrary just for the sake of it. She has every reason to want to prolong her visit to Pu Songling as much as possible, since she's been given free access to their expansive library.

There might be something more here that could help Daisy, she confided in him on their second phone call, as soon as Daisy wasn't within earshot. It's easy enough to track Basira's

mental calculus. Daisy needs the brooch sooner rather than later, but there's always a chance it won't work, and then they'll be back to square one. The possibility of finding a backup plan is enough to outweigh the risk of keeping Daisy waiting another day or two.

Wouldn't Martin be dragging his heels just the same if their positions were swapped? If there was the slimmest possibility of finding something that would help Jon, and he was expected to abandon that endeavor in favor of helping Daisy?

So Martin tries to rein in his exasperation as he gives his answer: "He wouldn't leave willingly. Not without a good reason."

"Or supervision," Georgie adds. "If at all. After he first woke up, I offered to take him to the shops *several* times. He never took me up on it, so I stopped asking."

"He didn't even want to leave here for Ny-Ålesund," Martin says.

"Yeah, but who would?" Basira says.

"It wasn't about the destination, though. He was just… scared to be out in the world in general."

It's difficult to reconcile the difference, Jon had said. *Like what I'm seeing is just an illusion, and behind it all is the world as I remember it.*

Basira is quiet for a moment. "You said he was hungry."

"Meaning?" Martin braces his hands on the desk, elbows locking as he leans closer to the phone, scowling at it where it rests. "What, you think he's off on a feeding frenzy?"

"I didn't say that," Basira says calmly. "You said he's been spacing out a lot lately, and… well…"

She doesn’t finish the thought – not here, where Jonah can listen in – but she doesn’t have to. Jon has been thoroughly candid about his past hunting habits, and he hasn’t been remiss in telling them all of what warning signs to expect.

“He didn’t leave the Archives,” Georgie says. “Rosie didn’t see him leave through the front of the building, and in order to get to the outside stairwell–”

“I would’ve noticed,” Daisy chimes in. “I had the outer door propped open for some fresh air. I was sitting right there the whole time between when Martin last saw him and when he went missing. I might not be a Hunter anymore, but he would’ve had to pass right in front of me. So unless the Eye taught him how to walk through walls or something…”

“Right,” Basira sighs. “Well, I’m almost done here.” She sounds more dejected than grudging, Martin notes with a twinge of guilt. “I’ll see if I can find a morning flight home. We can regroup in the tunnels once I get back. Just… don’t do anything rash before then, alright?”

Martin doesn’t make any promises.

The apocalypse hasn’t been kind to Upton House since Salesa’s protective bubble failed.

Before, the grounds were replete with lush grass, autumn foliage, and rows of flourishing asters – a sea of purple and white and blue hues, bees and hover flies darting amongst the flowers. The pollinators carried out their work, the birds sang from the trees, and miniature ecosystems thrived beneath the soil and within the nearby pond – all lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time, all blissfully unaware of the hell raging just outside their Edenesque cage. (At least, that’s the embellished picture Jon likes to imagine based on Martin’s descriptions. Though Martin had left the last part unspoken, and Jon, to his credit, had kept such cynical commentary to himself at the time. Martin didn't need to be reminded how bad things were. He just… was still capable of remembering what *comfort* looked like, and couldn't stomach the thought of Jon being made to forget.)

Now, the gardens have been reduced to a barren waste. Little remains of the vegetation: scattered clusters of wilted, flattened stems; splintering, deadwood trees; scant knots of withered grass, crunching softly beneath his feet. All of it is coated in a layer of dust, lending the once-verdant landscape an anemic appearance – a monotonous spectrum of washed-out greys and dull browns.

It was bound to happen. Such an idyllic sanctuary had no staying power in a world woven with fear. The whole world is dying now. Jon only wishes the End would speed it along.

When the Archive begins its recitation, Jon doesn't fight it.

"…I have not fought since I – saw the true scale of the devastation–"

"–as the world collapsed around me – a blessed relief – I thought I was dead. I wish I had been–"

"–I have no idea where to go now. I have walked so long my feet are bleeding, and I see nothing upon the horizon but more slaughter. More days without the living… I wandered this desolate country, though for how long I do not know. Days went by with not a single living creature to be seen, and only the dead for company–"

"–maybe this is now my life forever, and it will never, ever stop…"

The house itself is as pitiful as the grounds. The leftmost third is listing, sinking into the ground as the foundation beneath it disintegrates. Parts of the roof have collapsed. Nearly every window has been blasted out. One of the chimneys has been torn off, damaging the crumbling sandstone exterior where it fell and leaving a gaping hole large enough to serve as a means of entry.

"…there's something in there and I don't know which scares me more: the thought that it's more than just the things we left behind, or that that's all it is, and we can't escape the ruins of our own future–"

"–there's a gravity there – and I don't know how much longer I can resist its pull–"

"–you just can't help yourself. You need to know…. There's something here, you see. Something to be dug up, rooted out, buried within. A hollow space that all eyes point towards…"

Picking his way through the wreckage, Jon makes his way through to the entry hall. In a trance, he lets his legs carry him through the house, drifting aimlessly from room to room like a weary ghost until his bad leg finally buckles beneath him.

"…there seemed to be a safety in stillness, as though inaction could do no harm–"

"–and here I have remained. Perhaps I have told myself that I am preparing, gathering my own strength, and making plans to continue – but I think that in my heart, I have been waiting – for the final axe to fall–"

"–guess that's the thing about being the chosen one – at the end of it, you're always just the point of someone else's story…"

Tired, despondent, and hopelessly alone, Jon curls up where he fell, and he lets the Archive pull him under fully.

"…I just couldn't stand the thought of going any further in the story that was playing out in front of me–"

"–again I found myself in that dark, cold place, and this time I simply waited, hoping against hope that this time, it wouldn't be forever–"

"–I wondered how long it would be that I still had to wait for death – I have nothing left, except to hope that what remains of my own life is neither long nor memorable…"

Sometimes, desperate times call for stupid measures. Measures such as traipsing around a labyrinth in search of a roving door to beg the personification of gaslighting for assistance.

If knocking on Helen's door was a glaring sign of Martin's desperation, reaching out to Jonah Magnus could be considered a flashing billboard. It's likely to yield just as little success as Martin's appeals to Helen – and likely prove even more vexing, impossibly enough – but the alternative is doing nothing at all. So here he is, pacing in circles around Jon's desk, holding up the Head Archivist's direct line for – he checks the time – thirty-six minutes now, which is apparently how long it takes to argue and cajole his way into having someone get Elias Bouchard on the goddamn line, prison policy be damned.

The instant the tinny on-hold music cuts out and Jonah utters the first syllable of whatever snide greeting he'd had at the ready, Martin is interrupting to ask the question that's been poised on the tip of his tongue for an agonizing six-and-a-quarter days: "Where is he?"

"Martin," Jonah says crisply. "It's been quite some time since you reached out–"

"Tell me where Peter is or I'm hanging up."

"So you've figured it out. Good."

"Will you *just*–"

"Unfortunately for all of us, I don't Know where Peter is. The Lonely has a way of rendering its chosen few invisible. Even to the Eye. You know this as well as anyone."

Frustration rising up and spilling over, Martin buries one hand in his hair and pulls until it stings.

"However," Jonah says, maddeningly serene, "he'll turn up eventually. The Archivist is only a means to an end."

"To *you,* maybe. Jon's his own person. You have *no right–"*

"You can spare me the moralizing. Your feelings don't change the crux of the matter: we can do nothing until Peter decides to make his next move."

"'Do nothing' – that's the same 'strategy' you chose when the Circus had him, and look how *that* turned out–"

“He survived, didn’t he? If anything, it made him stronger.”

It’s only with considerable difficulty that Martin manages to stop himself from dashing the phone against the wall.

“Contrary to what you might believe, however, I was not merely standing by,” Jonah says. “I was gathering information, plotting the best course of action. I’m afraid I no longer have the same resources at my disposal, so I won’t be of much help this time.”

“Are you *ever?”*

“If you want to waste your energy raging at the unfairness of it all, I can’t stop you. But you would do better to use this time planning your countermove.”

“Fine,” Martin bites out. “So do you have any useful suggestions?”

“Peter has no interest in the Archivist. It’s you he wants.”

“For stopping the Extinction.”

Jonah hums an affirmative. “It’s become something of an obsession for him.”

“And? What’s your take on it? Is anything he says true?”

The question is a formality, of course, but it’s something that he *would* ask if he didn’t already know the answer. The Martin Blackwood to whom Jonah *believes* he is speaking is ignorant, incapable of posing a significant threat. Martin has no plans to dissuade him of that notion if he can help it.

Thankfully he's had some practice, what with managing Peter these past few months. If he's honest with himself, Martin has been practicing for much of his life. Performing a role, that is – straddling the line between capable and unassuming, so painstakingly self-aware that he scarcely knew who Martin Blackwood was underneath the mask.

His mother expected nothing but incompetence from him – struggling to excel in school, to pay the bills, to anticipate her arbitrary whims and meet expectations that always seemed to shift the moment he came too near to satisfying them. It took him too long to realize that she never *wanted* him to succeed, that there *was* no proving himself worthy in her eyes. His sole purpose in her life was to be a disappointment, and so the goalposts would always be kept out of his reach.

The true object of her resentment was unreachable, but all of that festering hatred had to go *somewhere.* Martin was the nearest target. She needed a stand-in, and who better than an unwanted son who looked more and more like his deadbeat father with every passing year?

Somewhere along the way, that hatred became personal. He wasn't just a substitute any longer. She made just enough of a distinction between the father and the son to realize that she despised both of them equally – though not enough of a distinction for Martin to ever step out of his father's shadow. He always suspected as much. Jonah didn't exactly have his work cut out for him when he demolished that last inch of denial to which Martin had been clinging.

He may have never earned his mother's approval – or even tolerance – but for better or worse, it taught him how to manage expectations. Lying on a resume, for example: demonstrating just enough competence that no one would suspect he faked his credentials, but not leaning so far into the role that people would truly take notice of him. Never stand out, never invite people to look too closely. (And if that meant he could never forge truly meaningful relationships, then, well – hierarchy of needs and all that. Emotional fulfillment wouldn't pay the bills, would it?)

Even so, Jonah Magnus has had several stolen lifetimes to perfect this game. The Eye only makes him more perceptive. Martin is an amateur by comparison. All of this to say: Martin has to tread carefully, and with every second this conversation drags on, the riskier the ploy grows.

“The statements Peter has been feeding you are true enough,” Jonah says, “but interpreting them is a far more subjective matter. Adelard Dekkar’s concerns were genuine. Gertrude didn’t buy into his theories, but it seems he was persuasive enough to sway Peter. *I* think he’s blowing it out of proportion, personally, but I can’t say for certain, and it hardly matters for Jon’s predicament. Peter has made up his mind, and he’s convinced himself that you’re integral to stopping its emergence.”

“Can’t imagine why,” Martin mutters. “I’m not exactly a chosen one.”

“Oh, it has nothing to do with *you*. You just happen to fit the criteria he’s looking for, so you’re the one he chose.”

Like you chose Jon, Martin thinks with a surge of outrage.

“He said he wants someone touched by both the Eye and the Lonely,” Martin says. “Why? What’s so special about that combination? I can’t see how it would have anything to do with stopping the Extinction.”

“He hasn’t shared the particulars, though I suspect that he’s trying to kill two birds with one stone. The Lonely has its own Ritual, and Peter has as much a stake in the arms race as the Stranger or the Dark. The Institute would be an invaluable resource in ensuring his success. He’s gotten it into his head that if he can convert enough of my staff, the Lonely’s influence will eclipse the Beholding’s, and he’ll be able to consolidate his hold over the Institute. It’s an absurd notion, of course, but if he’s already grooming you to stop the Extinction, he may as well take advantage of the opportunity to test his theory. Whether stopping the Extinction *actually* requires someone touched by both the Eye and the Lonely, I couldn’t say.”

Martin frowns. The lie is delivered smoothly enough, but it’s… somewhat lacking in the finesse he’s come to expect from Jonah. Maybe he really *is* floundering more than he lets on in the wake of Peter’s latest move.

“I thought you only appointed him as an *Interim* Head,” Martin says. “If you knew he wants the Institute for himself, why did you give him an in at all?”

“Honestly? Someone needed to keep an eye on things while I was gone, and my options were limited. I am still the beating heart of the Institute. The more mundane aspects of the position require someone with a physical presence, however. Despite his… *aspirations*, Peter is only acting as a figurehead.”

“‘Physical presence,’” Martin scoffs. “He’s hardly ever here. He leaves most of the administration to me.”

“Perhaps, but his nameplate on the office door is good for keeping up appearances. We can’t have all semblance of a hierarchy dissolving in my absence.”

“So that’s it, then? You just needed an ass in a seat?”

“More or less. Someone I could trust to steer the ship while my hands are tied, so to speak.”

Martin lets out an incredulous laugh. “You *trust* him?”

“Nothing so sentimental. I simply find him… predictable.”

“Do you, now,” Martin says flatly.

“I admit I should have outlined my terms more precisely, but in all the time I’ve known him, Peter has always been dreadfully uninspired.”

“Oh, good. You threw us all to the wolves on a hunch, then.” The plastic casing of the phone creaks as Martin tightens his grip on it. “Figures. You’ve been letting monsters use Jon as a punching bag for years without lifting a finger.”

“And he’s become a better Archivist for it.”

Jonah is predictable in his own way: covering his deceit in a thin veneer of truth, making the lie that much more believable; prodding at sore spots to get under the skin, to undermine confidence. Martin should be used to it by now, but every goading, callous remark still lands, stoking his simmering temper.

"Well, I hope you're happy," he snaps, "because there's no guarantee he's going to make it out of this one."

"I *have* been known to make errors in judgment from time to time." Jonah's smirk is practically audible. "Good thing he has you there to take care of him, hmm?"

Nothing Martin could say would cut Jonah as deeply as he deserves, so Martin says nothing at all, instead hanging up and tossing the phone aside in one fluid motion. It slides across the desk and clatters to the floor. He doesn't bother looking to see if he's broken it, but in the spirit of damaging Institute property, he kicks it into a nearby filing cabinet for good measure. He has half a mind to pick up where he left off burning statements, before–

At the first prickle of goosebumps crawling across his skin, Martin jolts to attention.

"Peter?" Typically, Peter's arrival inspires annoyance, if not outright dread. This time, Martin feels nothing short of relief – which lasts approximately five seconds before the usual exasperation sets in as Peter fails to materialize. "Peter, I know you're there–"

"*Here,* actually."

Martin's heart leaps into his throat. He turns on his heel to see Peter standing behind him.

"Let him go," Martin says breathlessly.

"Who, the Archivist?" Peter says, as if Martin could be referring to anyone else.

“I know you took him–”

“Yes, I did,” Peter says blandly. “But I’m not *keeping* him.”

“How does trapping him in the Lonely not count as *keeping* him there?”

“It’s not quite that simple, I’m afraid. All I did was open the door. He’s the one who crossed the threshold. So to speak.”

“You’re lying. He wouldn’t… he wouldn’t just *leave*–”

“Are you so sure of that?”

“Yes,” Martin says without hesitation. “He wouldn’t go willingly.”

“Semantics.” Peter shrugs. “I might have shown him in, but I’ve since left him to his own devices. He can leave whenever he wants.”

“That’s not how it works.”

“Isn’t it, though? You should know. You have firsthand experience.”

“You dropped him into the *Lonely*. How is he supposed to find his way out alone?”

“He found his way out of the Buried, didn’t he? Perhaps he doesn’t have an adequate anchor this time around.”

The insinuation doesn't hit as hard as it might have years, even just months ago.

"Or he's too deep to find it," Martin says.

"Maybe. He *has* sunk rather far by now."

"Then let me – let me go to *him*, then–"

Suddenly – so suddenly that even *Peter* seems to jump – the office door bursts inward, the force violent enough that the top hinge tears away from the frame. The harsh *crack* of splintering wood is immediately followed by a crunching sound as the handle smashes into the wall at the apex of its swing. The two people standing in the doorway cross the threshold without further ado.

Although Martin hasn't met either of them in person, between Jon's descriptions of them and the predatory glint in their eyes, he can put two and two together.

"We're here to give a statement," Julia says, singsong.

"Is the Archivist in?" Trevor follows up, baring his teeth as his grin stretches wider.

"No," Martin says curtly. Maybe he should be more frightened, but all he feels is furious, a prickling heat crawling up his neck. "Can't you all just *leave him alone?"*

"I rather think I've fulfilled that request," Peter says, sneering like the cat that got the canary.

Before Martin can retort, Trevor chimes back in: "Your Archivist's got something of ours."

"Stole it from us," Julia adds.

“We mean to take it back,” says Trevor.

“What’s the use of having a pet Hunter if it doesn’t head off intruders?” Peter says with a sigh.

“Daisy’s not an *it,*” Martin says immediately. *Or a pet,* he means to add, but it’s superseded by a far more pressing thought. “Wait – where–” An icy sensation settles in his gut as he looks to Julia and Trevor. “What did you do to her?”

“Nothing,” Julia says with a shrug. “Yet.”

“Dead to the world, that one.” Trevor chuckles to himself. “Passed out, looked like.”

No casualties so far, then. Martin takes a moment to be grateful that they never hired that extra security after all – and another to hope that he won’t have to reevaluate later, should Julia and Trevor decide to follow through on that dangerous *yet* on their way out.

“Your guard dog’s skin and bones,” Trevor goes on, “but I reckon she can still scream. Don’t want to give your Archivist a chance to slink away, do we? No shortage of monsters in this place, but near as I can tell, he’s the worst of the lot. The rest of you can wait your turn.”

“Maybe have a look in the mirror before you go around accusing other people of being monsters,” Martin says coolly.

“Sometimes it takes a monster to put down a monster,” Julia says, almost mechanically. “We do prefer to avoid bystander casualties, but–”

“Needs must,” Trevor says. “You want to put your life on the line for a monster, that makes you just as bad, in my book.”

Martin's hands tremble as he tightens them into fists. "You know *nothing* about–"

"This conversation is wearing thin," Peter cuts in. "I can only take so much of this soap opera you call an archive."

"And who's this?" Julia says, looking Peter up and down as if just noticing him.

Trevor sniffs the air. "One of the ghosty ones, I think."

"'Ghosty'?" Martin repeats.

"Cold, misty, broody–"

"Prone to disappearing acts," Julia says. "Keay laughed in his face when he called them 'ghosts,' but the old man keeps calling them that anyway."

"Better than 'Lonely,'" Trevor scoffs. "What do I care if a monster is *lonely*?"

"You've forgotten what it's like, haven't you?" Peter clucks his tongue softly. "That won't do."

"What?" Trevor says sharply. "What are you on about?"

"You've led a forsaken existence for most of your life. You've buried it deep, but it's still there. You told yourself you were fine as a lone wolf, but you weren't, were you? Would you even be able to hunt without a pack now?"

Trevor glowers, fists clenching at his sides. "What are you playing at–?"

“And you,” Peter says, turning his attention to Julia. “You don’t even know what it’s like to hunt alone. To *be* alone, certainly, but you never knew belonging, never found a purpose until you joined the chase. What would you be without it? Without someone to share the spoils?”

“Shut up,” Julia spits, but the ferocity in her voice is diminished by the way she blanches.

“Unanswered questions in the Watcher’s archives,” Peter says. “Let’s remedy that, shall we?”

“Peter,” Martin says uncertainly – but Peter waves him off.

Clouds of fog burst into being in the open air around them, blossoming in all directions like a drop of dye in clear water. It spreads and spreads until the entire office is blanketed in a mist so thick it feels like breathing smog. The chill seeps into Martin’s skin, cold enough to burn, and then to numb, and then, just as it feels as if it’s freezing the marrow in his bones–

The fog dissipates as quickly as it appeared. The Hunters are nowhere to be seen.

“D-did you…” Martin breaks off to cough as the painful itch in his throat makes itself known. Is it possible for one’s *esophagus* to get frostbite? “Did you just–”

“I despise interruptions,” Peter interrupts. “Now – where were we?”

“Jon,” Martin says hoarsely. “I want Jon.”

“I can’t imagine why. But if you’re so insistent, I’m sure we can come to an agreement.”

“You want my cooperation.”

“Yes. If you pledge yourself to the Forsaken, you have my word that I’ll drop him back in the Archives no worse for wear.” Peter pauses. “Well, maybe a *little* worse for wear, but he’s survived worse. Got eaten by worms, came back from the dead, managed to pull himself out of that coffin like a grubby Jesus–”

“I don’t need a play-by-play,” Martin interjects. “I was there for all of it.”

“Were you?”

Martin opens his mouth to retort – and then promptly swallows his protest.

“I guess I wasn’t,” he says softly. “And I’m not going to disappear on him again.”

Peter heaves an exaggerated, longsuffering sigh. “You have precisely two choices, Martin–”

“No, actually,” Martin says. “I have a better idea.” Peter narrows his eyes. “A wager.”

Peter looks skeptical, but intrigued. “Go on.”

“You let me go to Jon. If we find our way out together, you let us both go. If we can’t, then… then I’ll do what you want.”

“Not much incentive there. A straightforward trade – you for him – yields the same result, with no risk on my part. Why would I bother with a gamble?”

“Because it’s your only chance of earning my cooperation.”

Peter is silent for a minute, watching Martin's face carefully as he assesses the demand.

"You're bluffing," he says eventually. "I know your type, Martin. When push comes to shove, you'll do whatever it takes to save him."

"I would," Martin agrees. "But trading my life for his wouldn't be saving him. I'd still be abandoning him, just in a different way. I can't – I *won't* do that to him."

"He'd survive."

"Surviving isn't the same as living."

"You're being petulant–"

"And I'll *keep* being petulant until you agree to my terms."

Peter's expression twists with fury – more emotion than Martin has ever seen from the man. It lasts only briefly before he schools himself, lapsing back into his typical placid demeanor. The customary smugness remains absent, though, replaced by a tension in his muscles and a tightness in his voice.

"Winner take all, then," he says. "You find the Archivist, drag him out of the Forsaken, and make your way back here, I'll forfeit my claim on both of you. You fail, and–"

"We both stay in the Forsaken," Martin says. *Together.*

"Not quite," Peter says, smiling with malice. "The Archivist can stay where he is, of course. You, though – I expect your compliance. No complaints, no bargaining, no weaseling out. Once you've served your purpose, *if* I'm feeling generous, I may allow you to venture back into the Lonely. Who knows, maybe you can find your way to the Archivist a second time. Whatever's left of him by then."

“Is there a time limit?”

“Hardly seems necessary. I doubt he’ll last much longer where he is. He was already looking a bit… faded, when last I saw him. As for you… if you can manage more than a few days without succumbing, I’ll be impressed.”

“So I have until I ‘succumb,’” Martin says, complete with mocking air quotes.

“Well… I abhor an open-ended wager. On the off chance that you turn out to be more resilient than you look, I’ll give you three days. Three days, or until you give up. Whichever comes first.”

“You’re not allowed to interfere until then,” Martin says. “No hiding him from me, no blocking our exit, no leading me in the wrong direction, no… no doing *anything* to make my job harder.”

Peter tilts his head slightly to the side, regarding Martin with a condescending little half-smile. “I think you’ll find that the Lonely does that well enough on its own.”

“You give me seventy-two *unhindered* hours to bring Jon home. If I can’t…” Martin takes a deep breath in and releases it slowly. “If I can’t do that, you have my full cooperation going forward. But if I *can,* you have to let all of us be. You leave, you *stay* gone, and you don’t interfere with us – with *anyone* employed at the Institute – ever again. And – and you can’t get around that by targeting our families or friends. *Or* by getting someone else to do the job for you.”

“That’s quite the demand.”

“Take it or leave it,” Martin says. “Elias doesn’t count, of course. Feel free to take it out on him if you need an outlet. The rest is non-negotiable.”

It takes more than a few minutes before Peter gives his answer.

“Fine,” he says grudgingly. “Have it your way.”

“I assume you don’t want to shake on it?”

Martin snorts at the flat look Peter gives him – and then the fog is closing in.

Chapter End Notes

- Statement-speak citations for Chapter 30:
Section 5: MAG 170(x2); section 9: 150/130/150/060; 149/096/088; 020/143/145; 103/155/150.
Peter’s “this soap opera you call an archive” and “grubby Jesus” comments come from MAG 134. (Listen, I hate Peter, but I grudgingly love those lines.)

- I’m really, really sorry for the delay that somehow turned into a hiatus dfgdfhdf. I’ve been struggling with writer’s block, the world’s a mess, anxiety’s being unkind to my brain, had to change the dosage of one of my meds, the holiday season is making me frantic,,,,
honestly, I ended up having to rewrite most of this chapter several times before I got something I feel decent posting. I’m still unsure of it, but I think the more I stare at it the more I get in that “it’s never going to be Good, I’m gonna delete EVERYTHING” mood and risk burning myself out.
On the plus side, while this chapter was kicking my ass, I did start working on the next chapter a bit just to keep myself writing. I have a good chunk written, and so far I’m not hating it the way I did this chapter, lol. It probably won’t be done before the holidays but I’m hoping it won’t take longer than a month or two. I’d estimate that I have… maybe 3-4 chapters or so left before I wrap up the main story (don’t hold me to that though, as you can probably tell I suck at pacing and my outline for each chapter is basically a couple bullet points that I throw spaghetti at until something sticks and I end up with something in the vague shape of a chapter).

- Thank you so much for reading, and for all the comments over the past few months. They really did help salvage my motivation to keep going. I’ll be responding to them sometime during the next week probably. <3

- All of that said... should I feel bad about continuously yeeting the Hunters into pocket dimensions? Feels like I'm playing pinball at this point.

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

- btw if anyone here is like me and goes through sporadic bursts of playing-The-Sims-4-and-then-putting-it-down-for-six-months, I ended up building the Magnus Institute and uploading it to the TS4 gallery. It's not *exactly* as I picture it but it was as close as I could get within the limitations of TS4. I'm bubonickitten on there as well if anyone wants to check it out.

Love(d)

Chapter Notes

CWs for Chapter 31: lots of Lonely-typical content; recollections of parental neglect and emotional abuse (Martin's mother) and absence/abandonment (Martin's father); recollections of childhood internalized fatphobia/sizeism (and a parent contributing to self-consciousness re: size); depictions of trauma, dehumanization, and alienation as a result of being homeless; misgendering & use of "it" pronouns*; references to self-harm (scratching/picking at skin); references to past nonconsensual touching (nonsexual – it's all canon stuff, e.g. the Circus) and post-traumatic fear responses to touch; a bit of internalized aphobia; mental confusion, memory loss, and dissociation; vague passive suicidality (of the Lonely variety); threats of physical harm (of the Hunt variety); Peter being himself; some internalized ableism (re: the rejection sensitive dysphoria aspect of ADHD, but not explicitly stated as such).

Let me know if I missed anything!

*re: the "it" pronouns – it's not malicious per se (and is not directed towards any character as a transphobic attack or used to deliberately invalidate anyone's gender) but I think I should warn for it anyway. At several points, Jon thinks the people he's interacting with are just constructs pretending to be real people who have since died. He sporadically refers to them with "it" pronouns to remind himself that they aren't (in his mind) the people he once knew, and to distance himself emotionally from what he thinks are just memories the Lonely is using to mess with him. (Might be a bit disjointed to read as well, since he isn't consistent with it. In his defense, he's very disoriented here.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It only takes a moment for Martin's sense of victory to wane, his shoulders sagging like a deflating balloon.

Well, he thinks grimly, *now what?*

Admittedly, he didn't think much further ahead than this.

"Jon?" he calls out tentatively. There's something dreamlike about the dampened quality of his voice, as if the air itself can't carry a sound. He tries again, louder: "Jon!"

Martin sighs to himself. He may as well be screaming underwater for all the good it will do him.

At a loss, he scans his surroundings. While the auditory aspects of this place are dulled, the sight is anything but: a sprawling void, utterly featureless and yet paradoxically sharp, its stark whiteness glaring enough to make his eyes water. It's bright and blinding like sunlight glinting off fresh snow; cold and impersonal like the artificial white light of a hospital room–

Martin is ten years old, passing the afternoon sitting in the waiting room at the local A&E. Not sitting so much as squirming – partly to protest the discomfort of the plastic chair beneath him, but mostly to distract himself from the broken arm cradled against his chest.

It's been cycling between numbness and shooting pain since early this morning. His mother had just left for work, and she's been feeling under the weather lately, not in the mood for his fussing. He wasn't about to call and tell her he'd hurt himself climbing the bookshelf – which he shouldn't have been doing in the first place, because he knows *how clumsy he is, with his pudgy hands and poor spatial awareness and a body that, while bigger than most kids his age, seems reluctant to grow at the same rate as his feet. (Too disproportionately large to comfortably fit in a standard size shoe, but extra-wide shoes don't often show up in charity shops, and Mum can't exactly afford to buy him a new pair every time he has a growth spurt, can she? It's a bone of contention between them – one that Martin prefers to avoid calling to her attention.)*

Point is, he's a difficult child. Demanding and burdensome in ways that other children are not: growing too fast, eating too much, learning too slowly, talking too loudly. Any one of those might be tolerable on its own, but the little quirks and inconveniences add up.

He knows this; knows that he should do whatever he can to reduce the strain he places upon his mother, who already struggles to raise him on her own, to put food on the table, to keep a roof over their heads. Yet it didn't take long for the pain to win out, for him to cave in and confess to this latest blunder. To insist, as forcefully as he dared, that yes, he was certain that it was broken. He heard the whip-crack snap; could see the unnatural, nauseating angle.

He'd still had to wait a couple of hours before she could come home to deal with him, and by then his shoulder was twinging from holding his arm in place for too long.

The nurse behind the desk is nice enough. Adults have a habit of speaking as though Martin isn't there, but the nurse had looked him in his reddened, puffy eyes when she explained that it would be a bit of a wait before the doctor could see them. She had even tried to cheer him up, informing him that he would be able to choose the color of his cast. And he could even have all of his friends sign it – wouldn't that be nice?

It was *a nice thought, and he smiled weakly in response. He doesn't have any friends, of course, but it seemed rude to tell her that, almost like rejecting a gift. She was only being kind.*

If he's been dwelling on it ever since, well – that's his problem.

Now he's sitting – squirming – in this uncomfortable chair, his mother sitting beside him with her lips pursed and her legs crossed, jiggling one foot as she flips disinterestedly through a magazine. A muscle in her jaw ticks in sync with the sporadic flicker-and-buzz of the fluorescent overhead light. Every time she glances at the clock, Martin becomes more acutely aware of how much of an inconvenience he's caused.

Sit still, *Mum admonishes, turning the page of her magazine with unnecessary force.*

Martin shrinks in on himself, wincing when the movement of his shoulders jostles his arm. She's already cross with him for derailing her day with his carelessness, and here he is, making it worse.

She's already reprimanded him for complaining about his arm twice now, so instead he mumbles, in a poor attempt at making conversation: These are bad chairs.

They aren't meant to be comfortable, *she says curtly.*

She turns another page. Martin turns his eyes to the clock.

He always looks for comfort in the wrong places–

With a dizzying jolt, Martin is torn away from the memory and slammed back into the present moment, weak-kneed and reeling with whiplash. He sucks in a deep, ragged breath, gasping and shivering like a drowning man breaking the surface of an iced-over lake.

It's not terribly surprising, he supposes. If the Lonely is looking for something to unsettle him, this qualifies as low-hanging fruit. Some of his loneliest moments have been connected with the stark, sterile waiting rooms and wings of clinics and hospitals. He'd accompanied his mother to her appointments for more than half of his life; he spent much of the past year bouncing between the nursing home and Jon's too-quiet hospital room. None of those visits were fruitful: his mother refused to see him, Jon *couldn't* see him, and although each produced a slightly different flavor of loneliness, it all started to blend together after a while.

As if to punctuate the thought, he catches a whiff of disinfectant.

"Really?" Martin says, thoroughly unimpressed. *"This* is what you're going with? The worst you've got?"

It's not that it doesn't hurt. It's just that it's a *familiar* hurt. Something he's learned to weather – especially now that he has a reason to do so.

The scene around him changes then: the harsh antiseptic scent is replaced with salt on the air, his balance falters as the invisible ground beneath him crumbles into loose sand, and the silence gives way just slightly to the distant crash of waves.

Martin has just turned eight, and his parents have brought him to the beach for his birthday. He does not yet know that this will be their last outing as a family. Before the month is out, his father will make a decision that will change every–

"Yeah, yeah," Martin mutters to himself, and he starts walking.

The ever-present fog makes for poor visibility, obscuring everything beyond a six-foot radius from himself. He has no inkling of whether he's going in the right direction, or whether this place even has a stable geography. The beach could go on forever, as far as he can tell, with no variation to judge his progress. He could be going in circles. He could be covering no distance at all, trapped on a treadmill hidden beneath endlessly-generating, unchanging terrain.

It seems impossible that Jon could have ever found his way to Martin in this place before, but then again, he had the Eye to help him navigate, didn't he? It would be naïve to think that the power of love alone would have been enough to guide his way, as romantic as that notion might be. All of the power the Eye gives him is rooted in fear. Jon might have used the Archivist's abilities out of love, but it isn't love that *fuels* those powers.

Except… Martin *did* find his way through the Lonely once, didn't he? Jon had said as much: that in his future, they had been separated passing through a Lonely domain, and–

…I was so afraid you wouldn't come back to me. But you did. You rejected the Lonely all on your own. Found your own way out – found me…

If that was doable during the apocalypse, when the Powers were at their strongest, it *has* to be possible now, right?

So Martin keeps walking, holding Jon's words at the forefront of his mind – less a shield and more a machete to beat back the creeping tendrils of the Lonely.

Eventually, the backdrop transforms again. The shifting sand firms up between one step and the next, the chill moisture in the air becomes a genuine drizzle, and buildings begin to emerge from the haze, looming like icebergs on a fog-swamped sea. At first glance, the street is generic enough to be any residential London street, but… *off*. Something to the left of normal.

The identical townhouses crowding each side of the street are towering things, stretching up and up until they fade into a smog-choked sky, their windows fitted with cruel-looking iron bars. The sidewalks are in disrepair, riddled with cracks and potholes. The curbs are lined with an endless procession of benches: some with seats slanted downward, some peppered

with metal dividers, some in odd, twisted shapes more akin to abstract sculptures than functional pieces of street furniture.

As the uncanny details pile up, the scene as a whole takes on more and more of a distorted, dreamlike quality. A shiver ripples down Martin's spine as the hair on the back of his neck stands on end. Just as the creeping sense of dread is reaching a crescendo, a familiar voice rips through the silence, echoing down the empty street. Martin just barely strangles his startled yelp.

"Julia!" The desperate call is followed by a loud banging. As Martin approaches the noise, heart still racing, he can make out the sight of a very distraught Hunter through the mist, hammering on one of many townhouse doors. *"Jule!"*

A flicker of movement catches Martin's eye – the curtain in the window by the door rustling and snapping shut, as if to block out the sight of the anguished man on the stoop.

"I know you can hear me!" Trevor aims a vicious kick at the base of the door. It doesn't budge, and no response is forthcoming. "God *damn* it," he hisses, fists clenched in fury but shoulders slumping in dejection.

Martin expects him to move on to the next door, but instead Trevor trudges over to one of the nearby benches. When he tries to take a seat, the dividing rails shift to block his way. He tries another – a Camden bench this time – but as soon as he gets close, spikes erupt from its angular surface like weeds through concrete. He growls under his breath, but rather than lash out, he gives up – far more quickly than Martin would have anticipated – and collapses onto the curb instead, hunching over with his head in his hands.

Something in Martin's chest wrenches at the sight and before he knows it, he's moving closer. When he stops a few feet away, Trevor looks up at him with bloodshot eyes.

"You," he rasps out.

"Me," Martin agrees. He lapses into an awkward silence, at a loss for words.

Trevor glances over his shoulder at the benches, then back at Martin. “Hostile architecture,” he says with a humorless smile – a significant departure from the predatory grin he’d had earlier.

“What?”

“People don’t want to see bums *existing* in their neighborhood. They’d rather an eyesore like those” – Trevor jerks his head towards the benches – “than an eyesore like me.” The statement is slightly melancholy, slightly bitter – but more weary resignation than anything else. “They’ll spend a fortune on that rubbish, make sitting down uncomfortable for everyone, just so they don’t have to breathe the same air as the *wrong* sort of people.”

“That’s… horrible.”

“That’s how it’s always been. People look, but they don’t see.” Trevor shakes his head. Then he straightens his posture, a characteristic intensity sparking in his eyes once more as he stares Martin down. “Where is he?”

“Who, Peter?”

“Sims.” Trevor scowls into the middle distance. “I know he’s here somewhere. I can smell him.”

“Wh– *seriously?”* Martin says incredulously, sympathy giving way to outrage. “You’re *still* going after Jon? Don’t you think you have bigger things to worry about?”

“I don’t give a fig about your precious Archivist,” Trevor sneers. “Right now, I just need to find Julia.”

“Then why–”

“Taught her too well,” Trevor says, shaking his head with a wan smile. “She’s too good a Hunter to be tracked. But so am I. If she can’t find me, she’ll go after the prey, and she’ll be expecting me to do the same.”

Trevor hauls himself to his feet with a grunt and starts off down the street at a determined pace.

“Wait,” Martin blurts out, jogging after him, “you can – you can track Jon here?”

Trevor stops abruptly, doing a heel-turn. The menacing glint in his eye is back in full force now.

“Just got to follow his scent,” he says. “Keeps fading in and out, but I’ll find him. I’ll find *her*.” His cocky grin fades, replaced with a curled lip. “If you can’t point me in the right direction, I’ve no use for you. Stay out of my way.”

With that, Trevor stalks off. Martin deliberates for only a few seconds before trailing after him, keeping a short distance so as not to lose him in the fog. If Trevor notices, he doesn’t acknowledge it. He simply marches onward, calling Julia’s name into the frigid void, undeterred by the absence of any response.

“...you can feel the weight of the world, a world you were never meant to be a part of, pressing in on you from all directions; and the constant overpowering awareness of your own breathing, of how little there is between you and the very space around you that is completely hostile to your existence. The danger is real, as is the faint, hardened fear in your gut, but–”

“–it’s odd how you gradually come to accept things as real. By the time you drop the last of your rationalizations, there’s no longer any surprise left in you, just an awareness that no matter how wrong it might feel, it’s the reality you’re now in – there was nothing I could do. I looked around desperately for any escape that I might have overlooked–”

“Are you *still* going?”

As Jon watches the familiar apparition emerge from the fog, the only thing that crosses his mind is an exasperated, *This again?*

Here he had been hoping that the Lonely was at last taking him in. He has no idea how long he’s been here, only that he’s been unable to See anything going on outside the borders of this place. It’s the first domain that has buried him so deeply. Before, he was flotsam blown this way and that, tugged forward by spider silk and puppet strings; now, he is an anchor finally, *finally* hitting rock bottom.

It’s peaceful, in a way. There’s nowhere else to go, nothing more to See, and the stillness is a welcome change.

Or it *was,* anyway.

“I thought you would’ve lost your voice by now.”

Jon scowls. If the Lonely *is* going to let him fade into oblivion, he can only hope that his memory of Peter Lukas’s voice is one of the first things to go.

“Even when everything was going to hell, even when it just plain stopped making sense, and what I was seeing and hearing was obviously ghosts and monsters–”

“–the only ghosts that chose to follow me were–”

“–annoying as hell.”

“Hm. In a way, I suppose you *have* lost your voice,” says the thing masquerading as Peter. It’s not *Not-Peter,* not some creation of the Stranger – only a construct of the Lonely, cobbled together out of mist and memory.

Jon tunes it out, sinking gratefully beneath the surface as the Archive rises up to meet him.

"After that, it became hard to tell where he failed to begin, and easier to tell where I ended. People would forget me, but that was alright, because only real people care about who remembers them. And I was no longer among their number–"

"I really thought you would last longer, you know."

Jon just barely musters enough energy for a baleful glare.

"...of course I wasn't there," he says, willing the shade to dissolve back into the fog from which it came, *"and in my absence, I watched the realization on his face that, in reality, whoever he was, he had died decades before."*

If there was any substance to the ghost standing in front of him, it would wither under the Archive's scrutiny. The Peter-thing doesn't even flinch.

"And Martin had such faith in you, too," it tuts. "I can't imagine what it is he sees in you."

The Lonely is losing its touch. Such a statement would be far more incisive if it had chosen a different messenger. Someone whose opinion he actually cared about. Even *Helen* would have been a better choice, for all Jon has habituated to her heckling.

Then again, there's nothing that could be said that Jon doesn't already know. Nothing more cutting than the truths he already tells himself. And in a way, he *is* talking to himself. The Lonely is just a projection of his own thoughts.

That doesn't make it any less truthful.

With a tired sigh, he turns away. There's nothing to be gained by arguing with a dead man.

"I was shouting at nobody but myself, and so it was into my own mind that my curses and pleas burrowed and nested."

"Am I *boring* you, Archivist?"

Jon grits his teeth. He isn't an *Archivist* anymore. He is an Archive, and all of his material is stale. He hates that part of him can feel *bored* amidst all the horror – though it might be more aptly deemed numbness than boredom. At least if he stays still, he can't cause any more harm than he already has. That doesn't mean he wants to share this stillness with a ghost.

"Oh, how I wish he'd go away," Jon mutters.

The Lonely construct mimics Peter's smug grin with uncanny accuracy.

With any luck, that memory too will fade with time.

It's strange, Martin thinks, how a place can be so contradictory. The unbroken procession of soaring, uniform townhouses creates a sense of claustrophobia and entombment; conversely, the sheer *emptiness* of it all conveys feelings of distance, of being exposed but with no one to witness.

Well – *almost* no one, in Martin's case. Trevor has to be aware that he's being followed, but he must have deemed Martin inconsequential, because he has yet to acknowledge Martin's presence. The Lonely, opportunistic as it is, doesn't let that go to waste. Martin can feel it tugging at the edges of his mind, searching for weak spots to exploit, prodding at those feelings of alienation and insignificance. Luckily for Martin, he's already accustomed to being overlooked.

He can only hope that Trevor knows where he's going – and that Jon is still his intended destination. He certainly *seems* confident, making a beeline down the street, slowing only infrequently to scent the air before powering onward. Granted, there are only two ways to go:

forward into the mist-veiled unknown, or back the way they came. The buildings on either side flow seamlessly one into the next with no gaps to walk between them. That fact doesn't seem to perturb Trevor in the slightest. If anything, he seems to have tunnel vision, never once glancing over his shoulder, never stopping to take in his periphery.

Normally, Martin would dread the idea of a Hunter tracking down Jon with such dogged conviction. Right now, it might be Martin's only hope of finding his way.

He doesn't know how long they've been walking before the scenery shifts again. The inhospitable street terminates abruptly, the cracked asphalt giving way to drab, dusty ground and sparse clusters of desiccated grass that crunch beneath their feet. Through the haze, Martin can make out the silhouette of a wide, squat structure.

As they draw closer, the details gradually come into focus, revealing a sagging foundation and a partially collapsed roof. A chunk of the wall has caved in, leaving rubble strewn across the ground. Trevor doesn't slow or stop, plotting a course through the debris with single-minded focus. One might not expect him to be so agile given his age, but he vaults over the shattered remnants of the building's exterior with apparent ease.

It takes Martin more than a few seconds to clamber through the gap himself, and that short delay is almost enough for him to lose sight of Trevor, barely catching a glimpse of him as he rounds a corner down the hall. Martin has to jog to catch up. Trevor stalks down the hall at a brisk pace, not stopping to search or even glance at any of the rooms as he passes.

It's a good thing that Martin is still a ways behind; otherwise, he would have crashed headlong into Trevor, who halts abruptly just outside a closed door. He sniffs the air once, then smiles to himself. Martin has only a moment to fret over whether or not that's a *good* thing. Trevor doesn't even bother to check the knob before barging through, ramming the door with his shoulder and stumbling a bit when it meets no resistance from the other side.

What greets them is not a room, but a vast, open space not unlike the one in which Martin first found himself upon entering the Lonely's domain. Over their heads stretches the same blinding white void, but the ground itself is barren in a different way: not blank and featureless, but a bleached dustbowl of sorts, coated with some sort of fine particulate.

In the far distance looms a massive shape – an impossibly tall tower of some sort, or rather the shadow of one. It's so hazy as to seem like a mirage, but the sheer dread that washes over him at the sight dispels any doubt as to its existence. It inexorably draws the eye, looming in his periphery no matter which way Martin looks, the knowledge of its presence inescapable and impossible to ignore.

The rest of the landscape looks still and undisturbed, a flat expanse broken up only by small, scattered clumps. Martin nudges one with his foot to reveal a fragment of wreckage – a brick, he thinks, or a chunk of concrete – hidden beneath an inch-thick layer of sediment.

Before he can think better of it, he stoops to run his fingers through it. It's powdery, he realizes, grimacing at the bone-white residue it leaves on his skin. Plaster dust, maybe…?

Yeah, he thinks to himself, wiping his hand off on his trousers. There are more sinister options, of course, but – ashes aren't usually this white, are they? Jane Prentiss's certainly weren't. And wouldn't bone dust be more… granular? Not that he's had much experience with that sort of thing–

Plaster dust, he decides, burying his unease under a thin layer of bravado. It's likely that none of this is even *real*, but rather an illusion cooked up by the Lonely, albeit a very convincing one.

Real or not, the… *dust* is enough to muffle Trevor's footsteps as he moves forward. If he spares any thought for the wafts of the stuff he's kicking up – the stuff they're now *inhaling,* Martin notes grimly – he gives no indication. The clouds linger in the air to mark their passing, disrupting the stillness in a way that feels somehow wrong, as if they're trespassing on hallowed ground.

Martin shakes his head. He's fairly certain that's the Lonely talking, and he can't afford to give it an inch. Between the fog and the dust, visibility is just as poor here as it is in the rest of the Lonely. Suppressing his lingering revulsion, Martin starts after Trevor again before he can lose sight of him.

"Jule!" Trevor calls, pausing to listen. There's no response, not even an echo. He cups his hands around his mouth and tries again: *"Julia!"*

It only takes a couple of minutes of this for Martin to tire of the answering silence.

"So…" To Martin's credit, he flinches only slightly when Trevor glares his way. He gestures vaguely at their surroundings. "Where, uh… where have you brought us?"

"There's no *us,*" Trevor growls.

"Don't let the Lonely hear you say that," Martin says, not quite under his breath, but Trevor is already stalking off again.

Several fruitless minutes go by like that, with Trevor growing incrementally more desperate every time his calls go unanswered. Martin is just about to risk badgering him again when he hears it: a low murmuring, drifting in and out of earshot.

"…time and tide and life had pushed him into it…"

"Jon?" he says breathlessly, just as Trevor yells for Julia again. *"Shh!"* Martin hisses. Trevor whips around, teeth bared, but Martin cuts him off before he can say anything. "I hear something."

Trevor freezes in place, head tilted slightly, as if listening. He hardly gives it a few seconds before glowering at Martin again. "I don't hear any–"

"…he was, as definitely always had been the case, trapped–"

"There." Martin sidesteps Trevor and creeps slowly forward, straining his ears.

"*–bordered on all sides with no escape and no recourse…"*

With the statement fading in and out, and the acoustics of this place being what they are, it's difficult to pinpoint the source. But Martin is positive now that it's Jon, and so preoccupied with listening for his voice that he pays no conscious mind to where his feet are taking him.

"…time had no meaning here. There were no clocks or watches – the world had stopped spinning, his prison was still – his existence was static, and eternal. Immutable. Sleep was only a memory, because even the prospect of unconsciousness might have made his present state slightly more bearable…"

"Keep going," Martin whispers when the pause stretches a bit too long. He can't recall ever wishing for a statement to *not* end, but here he is. "Come on, Jon, *keep talking."*

There is a faint, rattling gasp, and then the statement picks back up – faintly at first, but becoming more distinct as Martin walks.

"…these things, grim and fearful as they were, were not unfamiliar. The aching hunger was not new – just enough to remind him he had eyes, starved and hollow though they were – just enough to remind him that there was *such a thing as sky, that the endless, open air existed. Enough to kindle in him the fear that he might never see it again–"*

"Jon!"

"–he has long since discarded hope and joy, but deep down he still believes there may be a place where he does not suffer as now – for what true fear can exist without hope, without the belief that things might change for the better? To tug at the knowledge that they will only get worse?"

There's something up ahead – a shadow, small and hunched.

"…between the fear and the despair he makes his choice and digs – deeper, perhaps, than he has ever been before – abandoning the route that has been carved for his emergence – making its lonely way towards some secret destination no human could understand…"

Martin picks up his pace as the fog begins to churn, condensing into opaque masses that rapidly gather together to form a curtain, obscuring the figure. However solid it looks, it parts easily as Martin closes that last bit of ground, finding himself so abruptly in front of Jon that he nearly trips over him.

"Oh my god, I found you," Martin says, sinking to his knees – disbelieving at first, and then, with a giddy sort of chuckle: "I *found you."*

There's no response. Jon simply continues droning on – some disjointed statement that Martin doesn't recognize, something about dirt and darkness and tunneling worms – spitting out fragment after fragment of horror, stuttering occasionally like a jammed tape.

"Jon?" Martin says tentatively.

"…dead, or quiet enough that it makes no difference…"

Martin forces himself to take a calming breath. This isn't the first time Jon's gotten lost in the Archive, and it's not all that surprising, given how long he's been here alone. He seems physically unharmed, at least, though upon closer inspection Martin can see that his cuticles and fingernails are encrusted with dried blood. Although there's no obvious source, Martin has seen Jon scratching at himself often enough to know that if he were to roll up his sleeves, there would be blood on his forearms as well.

Usually when Jon recites statements like this, he's rapt, his eyes filled with an eerie sort of intensity, if faraway. Now, they appear vacant and dull, as washed-out as the rest of him. Martin waves a hand in front of his face, careful not to move too quickly or reach too close. There's no indication that Jon registers the motion – no flutter of the eyelid, no minuscule twitch of the eye, not even a blip of awareness. Seated on the ground with his knees drawn up to his chest, stock-still but for the movement of his lips as the statement drags on, he stares straight ahead, eyes riveted on something only he can see.

Assuming he's seeing anything at all, that is. There's nothing much *to* see, save for that horrible, far-off tower skulking in the corner of Martin's eye. The rest is just a wasteland worn down to nothing, not even a breeze to stir what little detritus remains.

I can't fully trust it, Jon had said on the eve of his departure to Ny-Ålesund. *Like what I'm seeing is just an illusion, and behind it all is the world as I remember it.*

Is this what he meant? Martin wonders, swallowing around the painful lump in his throat. *Is this how he sees the world, even after all this time?*

"Found you," comes a low growl.

It's the only warning Martin gets before Trevor lunges forward.

It's miserable, how quickly one can come to associate touch with pain.

Granted, Jon has never had an easy relationship with touch. If his parents were generous with hugs and affection, he can't remember. His grandmother certainly wasn't – and there wasn't anything inherently wrong with that. Not everyone is tactile.

Between a simple lack of experience with physical affection and fluctuating sensory issues, it makes sense that touch never came naturally to him. Initiating it, sustaining it, navigating it – other people always made it look so effortless, so intuitive, so *normal.* He doesn't think he ever had an in-depth discussion about boundaries until he met Georgie, simply because he had never been so close to someone as to necessitate it.

And he never realized until then what he had been lacking.

Not always, and not in all ways. As it turned out, his boundaries were too nebulous to articulate and too capricious to pin down. More often than not, *he* didn't know how he was feeling at any given moment, let alone how to predict his own responses on any given day. Georgie was… unexpectedly patient. It's not that he expected her to be *im*patient, per se. Rather, he didn't know *what* to expect, given that he was lacking a frame of reference, but he

was never the type of person who inspired patience in any other area of his life. Why would this have been any different?

When their relationship fell apart, he never sought out another. Not that he was yearning for another. With very rare exceptions, the thought of actively pursuing a romantic relationship simply… didn't cross his mind. As for those rare exceptions, well… he learned fairly quickly that Georgie had been an outlier. Just because she was willing to put up with his idiosyncrasies and intractable stipulations didn't mean the rest of the world would be as forgiving.

What he *was* missing, though – what he never realized he had been missing until he'd had it and then lost it – was affection. Not all of the time – not even most of the time – but enough that he felt its absence more keenly than he ever had before.

That didn't mean he *needed* it. He'd survived most of his life without it. If he had the occasional – *childish,* he would scold himself – craving for a simple hug, that was no one's problem but his own.

Those sporadic bouts of longing were perfectly manageable, easy to dismiss with just the right cocktail of denial and distraction – for a while. That precarious status quo was no match for burrowing worms, boiling wax, knives at his throat, week after week after *week* of ropes cutting into his skin and faceless *things* with roving hands kneading lotion onto every exposed bit of him–

He was vacillating between touch starvation and touch aversion more than ever before, cycling so rapidly he could scarcely keep track. Most days, he didn't know what he wanted more: to claw his own skin off, or for someone to crush him into a bruising embrace. Either one would have been fine, so long as there was a chance his skin would actually feel like it was *his* again.

Before and after Georgie, no one wanted to touch him. Then, suddenly, *everything* seemed to want to touch him. He was nothing but skin to be worn, to be marked, and he still doesn't know which was worse: being tailored into a homemade apocalypse, or simply being a source of nourishment for unfathomable, unthinking things that feed on fear, no more or less significant than a fly caught in a spider's web.

Excepting the occasional proffered hug from Georgie – after he had dragged her back into his life, before he exhausted her patience yet again – he did not know a kind touch.

Until Martin.

Then Martin was gone, and now there is nothing. These days, there are very few monsters that would dare lay a hand on the Archivist. He probably shouldn't resent that as much as he does.

Apparently none of that matters. Nothing has touched him for ages, not even to hurt, but it only takes one sudden, violent movement into his space for muscle memory to kick in. It's only after he has already reacted, jolting away and scuttling backwards, that he's unceremoniously dragged into the present moment.

In the same instant, the vaguely-human-shaped blur that had been reaching for him is jerked roughly backwards. Something else takes its place, planting itself firmly between Jon and his assailant. There is sound now where before there had been quiet – stifled and distorted, but carrying the cadence of human speech.

It's… an argument, he thinks. Much as he wants to tune it all back out again, to sink back into that static headspace, he's never managed to entirely snuff out his curious streak, no matter how much destruction it has wrought. So he listens.

Or tries to, anyway. One of the voices is… not quite garbled, but unintelligible. Although Jon can hear the individual words, he can't actually hold them in his head long enough to synthesize them into something meaningful.

The other voice, though – that one is clear. And he recognizes it immediately.

"Where is she?" it gasps out. The bulkier shape holding it back is still indistinct, scarcely more than a smudge of a silhouette, but Trevor's features gradually come into focus: constricted pupils, wide eyes, ashen skin. Much like the last time Jon saw him, there's a desperate, panicked edge to him, at odds with the composure and confidence of the Hunter he once was.

“I *said,*” Trevor snarls furiously, “where is she? *Where’s Julia?”*

But it’s not Trevor, is it? He’s long-dead. Unlike so many of the tormented, he had been granted release in the earliest days of the apocalypse. Enough time has passed for Jon’s pity to sour into bitter envy.

Of all the dead the Lonely could choose with which to pester him, Trevor seems a decidedly odd choice. Then again, maybe that envy is exactly what the Lonely is trying to tap – the knowledge that even other Avatars can hope for an escape that is denied the Archivist. A roundabout way of reminding him that he will likely be one of the last things standing, alone in a ruined world of his own making.

As a person, he is insignificant; as an Archive, he is too important to be set free – but only in the way that a cog might be necessary for the proper functioning of a machine.

“Tell me!”

Distantly, Jon can feel a dull glimmer of irritation break through the numb detachment. Why can’t the Lonely just do as it’s meant to and *let him be alone?*

“…she was already dead,” he answers curtly.

The ghost’s face is drained of what little color it had left. “What?”

“They were dead, every one of them–”

“You’re lying–”

“Trouble is, once they’ve really got their teeth into you, you’re as good as dead–”

“Shut *up!”* Trevor – *not* Trevor – makes one last attempt to spring in Jon’s direction, but the hazy form barring the way stands firm. It’s speaking again – shouting, really – something that sounds more like mangled phonemes than actual *words.*

Jon can still make out Trevor’s half of the conversation. Snippets of it, anyway. Promises of grievous bodily harm; a few homicidal threats for good measure, all as lukewarm as they are unsurprising. Even if this *wasn’t* all just a figment of his imagination, Jon doubts that even a Hunter could put him out of his misery at this point.

The Beholding has no concept of mercy. If it did, it would never deign to offer it.

The muffled confrontation lasts little more than a minute before Trevor storms off. The other figure, still fuzzy around the edges, turns to kneel in front of Jon. It’s speaking directly to him now. Much as he wants to let the fog and the static drown it out, that damnable inquisitiveness still rears its head.

And then a spark of recognition tears through his mind. All at once, the words are thrown into stark clarity.

“Jon?” It’s hardly a whisper, yet it cuts through the silence like a gunshot. “He’s gone, Jon.”

It sidles a little closer. Unconsciously, Jon inches backwards, repelled like identical poles of a magnet. He can’t breathe. Physical distance isn’t enough. He hunches forward to hide his face behind his knees, mentally retreating back into the familiar headspace of the Archive. It eagerly surges forward to occupy that vacancy, words spilling out of his mouth in a harried, stumbling staccato.

“We’re all alone out there – I know – there’s nothing *– no one is coming – and that was it. I was trapped alone in – deserted empty space. I had plenty of food – so starvation wasn’t a danger – but sometime – the clock stopped working – became utterly impossible – to guess how long I spent in that strange exile – largely fueled by despair and that quiet aching terror of being utterly forsaken–”*

"–time is not exactly as firm a concept to me now as it perhaps once was. My head is too heavy to give much thought to a clock–"

"Jon."

Jon glances up to confirm that the ghost hasn't come any closer. It hasn't, but its face is clearer now – enough so for the Archive's litany to stutter to a halt as Jon's heart flutters in his chest. It's only a brief pause, long enough for Jon to remind himself that the Lonely *lies*.

"…in this empty world – huddled and frozen in some terrible fear I find myself unable to name –I almost think I hear the mocking joy of my friends, but there is nobody here, and never shall be again. I try – to lose myself in something that is not the absence of humanity–"

"–I couldn't even – watch anything–"

"–the chaos that waits – beyond the walls–"

"–I did not even get the comfort of company in my delusions, though at some point the line between dreaming and reality seemed to blur – they weren't hallucinations, though they were dreams, even if the cold did seem to seep out of them and into the bones of me–"

"Jon?" A pause, and then, gentleness giving way to slight exasperation: "Jon, I know you can hear me."

It's not Martin. It *can't be* Martin. It would be an insult to his memory to even indulge in this fraternization with this – this *facsimile*–

"…there was no chance he was alive – makes me feel sick, like we're just – dishonoring his memory…"

But it's been *so long* since Jon last heard his voice, and Jon has never claimed to be a strong person. There's nothing left to lose, nothing to break any more than it has already been broken, no one to judge but himself – and he could always use more fodder with which to destroy himself. So against his better judgment, he looks up and he answers.

"...I can't stop listening – now I know they're the only way I'll ever hear – voice again–"

"–I guess, maybe, that's why I'm talking to you."

Martin breathes a sigh of relief. The smile that touches his lips is an exact replica of the one that Jon remembers. The resemblance is offensive.

"Come on," Martin – not Martin, *not* Martin – says, extending an upward-facing palm. The motion is a bit too hasty, too enthusiastic; Jon can feel himself automatically recoil again. "S-sorry, I didn't mean–"

Jon watches him warily: not blinking, not breathing, eyes fixed on the outstretched hand.

"Look, I – I don't mean to push you, but" – Martin casts a nervous glance around the area – "but we can't stay here. We have to go, now."

"Why?" Jon should probably be ashamed at the quaver in his voice, the tightness in his chest, the painful lump in his throat at the thought that even the concept of loneliness itself doesn't want him.

It's a tired, timeworn reaction, this oversensitivity to the merest hint of rejection. It began in childhood and has whispered in his ear ever since, no matter how he has tried to suffocate it. The monster in him has consumed so much, has eclipsed so much of the person he was, the person he wanted to be. It's absurd that the cringing child in him has survived after all this time. After all he's done.

"What do you mean *why?"*

"I *mean,* since when have the Entities been anything but greedy?" Jon says. "You've already devoured everything else. Why draw the line at me?"

“What?” A nervous laugh, as uncannily accurate a reproduction as the smile. “Jon, I–”

“Don’t.” Jon can feel fury kindling in him once more, burning through the layers of numbness. “Don’t you *dare* use his voice, his – his *likeness*–”

“Jon, it’s – it’s me,” the ghost says, desperation creeping into its voice. “It’s *Martin.”*

“Why?” Jon demands again. “Why are you doing this?”

“I…” It hesitates briefly, biting down on its lower lip. “You don’t belong here.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t belong here, either, and I’m not leaving you alone. I love you.” It’s said defiantly, almost combatively, and Martin seems to realize that, letting out an embarrassed chuckle. “I – I don’t know why it’s taken me so long to say it, but – but I do.”

“You did,” Jon says with a watery smile, something between a laugh and a sob caught in his throat. “You really did. No matter how difficult I made it, you… you still cared. Never stopped caring.”

“I still do,” Martin says. “And it’s not *difficult.*”

Jon scoffs.

“W-well,” Martin hedges, tripping over the syllables, “well, alright, it’s hard to take care *of* you sometimes – to convince you to take care of *yourself,* more like – but it’s not hard to care *for* you, *about* you. It’s not difficult to love you.”

“Your life was a living hell from the moment you met me,” Jon says, “and I never got a chance to make up for it. You deserved better than I could give, and I – I *knew* that, and I latched onto you anyway.”

“That’s not–”

“I lost you.” Jon hunkers down and hugs his folded legs closer to his chest, knees drawn up to his chin. He can feel his hands, one clamped on each calf, automatically tighten their bruising, clawlike grip. “I *lost* you–”

“–we had finally come to the end of the path, and it was just that: an end–”

“I lost you too,” Martin says gently. “You came back–”

“Don’t.” Jon still can’t quite bring himself to meet the ghost’s eyes, but he looks up to cast a feverish glare in its general direction nonetheless. “You’re not him. You’re not *real.*”

“This” – Martin gestures at their surroundings, sounding frustrated again – “isn’t real. I am. *You* are. Here – take my hand–”

Its reach is far less abrupt this time, less a grab and more an offer, but that doesn’t stop Jon from instinctively cringing away in raw terror, clutching his clenched fists to his chest to shield them from Martin’s outstretched hand. *“Don’t touch me!”*

“Jon–”

“Go *away*,” he says – practically *begs*, the quiver in his voice turning the word into more of a plea than a demand.

“No,” the ghost replies, and – *god,* even that stubborn tone is a perfect rendition. “I’m not leaving you–”

"Leave." There's a horrific, scathing weight to the command, a conglomeration of dozens upon dozens of desperate pleas torn from the Archive's annals of secondhand terror.

Even as it stands on shaky legs and begins to back away, the doppelganger has the audacity to choke out one last plea of its own: "Jon, *please* – just – just *look* at me–"

Compulsion doesn't require eye contact.

"Leave–me–alone–!"

Martin has just enough time to see Jon's terror-stricken eyes go unfocused again before he's forced away, a curtain of fog dropping down between them.

Behind that opaque barrier, he can hear the Archive's recitation resume:

"How can unspeakable carnage become so tired and repetitive? It seems the dead simply pile higher and higher on both sides, and nothing changes but the number of ghosts. And I find myself walking through that bloody landscape that has consumed all – I am a stranger here, yet if you told me I were dead, and this place my just reward, I would not for one second doubt your honesty. I have seen no vision of hell that can compare. Neither could I say I have not earned it. Not for nothing do these drowned and murdered faces pursue me…"

"Seems to be one of his favorites, that."

Martin glances sharply to his left to see Peter standing there, a self-satisfied smile on his face.

"He's fading fast," Peter says approvingly. "I *did* warn you." He gives a disingenuous, pitying sigh. "Face it, Martin. You've already lost him to this."

“You’re *wrong*.”

“Seems to me he’s made his choice. And it wasn’t you.”

“None of this was his *choice,*” Martin shouts, flinging one arm out in a sweeping gesture. “Everyone keeps expecting him to just – *know* everything, all the time, and – how is *anyone* supposed to make a fair choice when information is being deliberately withheld from them? He – he doesn’t even know what’s *real* right now–”

Which means I’m going about this all wrong, Martin realizes. Emotional appeals are never going to work if Jon doesn’t even believe that Martin is *Martin.* But if Martin can just draw his attention to all the little details that don’t add up, make him actually *see* the discrepancies that prove that this is all just a memory…

“You have no chance of reaching him as he is now,” Peter says.

Martin has made the mistake of succumbing to that hopeless conclusion in the past. He had assumed that Jon was unreachable in the midst of his coma, but he was still in there. When Jon was lost in the Coffin, he still sensed when Martin was calling him home. He not only survived an *apocalypse,* but managed to claw his way back into the past, spurred into action by Helen’s taunting and sustained by sheer desperation. If he wasn’t too far gone then, he’s not unreachable now.

Jon may have refused to make eye contact, but Martin was still able to catch a glimpse as the indifferent, empty look in his eyes gave way to a fury so profound that Martin was taken aback. It was nothing like the cold, haughty disdain that characterized their earliest interactions; nothing like the trademark irritated glare that followed a misfiled statement, a sympathetic comment about spiders, or pushback against his bullheaded contention that *surely there’s a perfectly natural explanation for the man’s body to be completely encased in web, Martin.*

Even when Jon suspected Martin of murder – even during the heated confrontation that led Martin to confess about his fraudulent CV – Jon has *never* looked at Martin with quite so much rage as he did just minutes ago.

Martin remembers what it was like, during those months he spent bogged down in fog – how detached he was from himself, how any faint stirring of emotion felt like it was happening to someone else. If Jon was irretrievably lost, would he have had the wherewithal for such a passionate outburst?

"I'm bringing him home," Martin says firmly, then turns another glare on Peter. "Why are you here, anyway? If I was out of time, you'd say so. You agreed not to interfere until then."

"I'm here to make you an offer," Peter says. "I thought you might reconsider this fool's errand, now you've seen he's a lost cause. We can renegotiate. A simple trade: you for him."

"Sounds like you're worried," Martin says coolly. "You know I can reach him."

"Not at all. You'll be pledging yourself to the Lonely either way. I'm simply growing tired of the wait, and I couldn't care less what becomes of the Archivist. I'm more than willing to cut him loose if it means putting an end to this spectacle. So – do we have a deal?"

"No."

What Peter doesn't realize is that Martin won't be cooperating willingly regardless of what happens here. It's possible that Peter won't, either – that he *also* has no intention to make good on his end of the bet should he lose. But even if Peter *is* honest, Martin has no obligation to reciprocate. The simple fact of the matter is that he has never been above manipulation. He's spent far too much time running, hiding, tangled up in someone else's web. He has no qualms playing the spider himself – particularly when it comes to someone like Peter.

That's the thing about being chronically underestimated. No one is surprised when he runs around trying – and failing – to put out fires. No one ever expects him to set one of his own.

"Have it your way," Peter sighs. "Maybe it's for the best he stays. How long do you think he'll last out there, hmm? How long can he really go without feeding the Beholding? I

wonder which will come first – starvation, or loss of self. I suppose both are deaths of a sort. Here, though… here, the Eye can't reach him."

"I'm not going to just – *leave him* here."

"You could visit."

"That doesn't sound like a very Lonely thing to do."

"There are different flavors of loneliness, Martin. The One Alone has a diverse palate. It can derive sustenance from his feeling of being bereft each time you take your leave. The Lonely has a way of… tampering with a person's hold on reality, as you can see. Even if you always come back, he won't remember that. Every time you part ways, he will be subjected to the fear that you may never return – and not knowing, for an Avatar of the Beholding, adds its own seasoning."

"What makes you think I would *ever* want to put him through that?"

"He'll be *safe.* Wasn't that your goal all along? Pledging yourself to the Forsaken in exchange for the Archivist's safety?"

"I'm not Lonely anymore."

"That's what he said, and look at him now." A sated smile crosses Peter's face, as if he's savoring a meal, before he continues, his demeanor now a mockery of gentleness. "In many ways, this is a mercy. Here, he can rest. Memories of grief and loss will grow distant as time passes. He'll have a vague sense that *something* is missing, but he won't remember what it is. In time, he might not even remember why he carries such guilt. He will be lost, and confused, and *lonely*, but he won't be in agony. He will find more peace here than he *ever* would out there. It would be a kindness."

"There's nothing peaceful about this."

Peter gives a considering hum. “If you were to give yourself over to the Lonely, you would have the power to shape this place.”

“What, it would just – grant me the power to make him *happy?”*

“I didn’t say that. The Forsaken still requires sacrifice. It will feed off of him regardless. But you can make this place softer, gentler. It may not be ideal by your lofty standards, but it would be far more pleasant than what awaits you both outside of here.” Peter shrugs. “Lost in the archives, lost in the Forsaken… what’s the difference, really? At least here, he doesn’t pose a danger.”

“He’s not a danger.”

“He certainly seems to think otherwise.”

“What the Archive and the Lonely have in common is that he’s not staying lost in either of them,” Martin says, squaring his shoulders and turning his back on Peter. “I don’t care how stubborn he is, he’s coming home with me.”

Chapter End Notes

peter: [yeets hunters into the lonely bc he can’t be bothered with a dramatic standoff]
martin: thanks for the tour guide, dipshit. you dumbass. you absolute buffoon

also, one of my favorite little canon details about Martin’s character is that he just… impulsively touches things he shouldn’t. p sure it only happened in like, one or two episodes, but I’ve since run with it and my headcanon is that he is habitually like a cat that sticks its paw in candle flames with wild abandon. of course he’d see a potentially sinister Unidentified Substance and poke at it like, “what is this, baking soda for lonely people? bones?? *asbestos???* hey jon does your subconscious take constructive criticism”

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- Archive-speak citations for Chapter 31:
Section 2: 051/129; 137/010/042; 085 (x4).
Section 3: 166 (x8).
Section 4: 167; 037; 056; 057/074; 092/057/161/057; 035; 077/035; 063.
Section 5: 105.

- If you're unfamiliar with Camden benches, they look like this, and they (and other examples of hostile architecture) really are a cruel and myopic way of "deterring" homelessness.

- Shorter chapter than the last few because this was originally meant to be the first half of a single chapter, but (1) it was getting way too long for one chapter and (2) the last part is still giving me trouble. But it's almost done, so I'm thinking next chapter will be up in… maybe two weeks or so?? Hopefully??

- As always, thanks for reading! I'll be responding to the comments on the last chapter over the next few days I think. <3

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

The Run-Around

Chapter Notes

CWs for Chapter 32: Lonely-typical themes & imagery; temporary memory loss, mental confusion, and dissociation/dpdr; misgendering (including use of "it" pronouns; same context as last chapter); references to Mr. Spider (including survivor's guilt & Jon downplaying his own trauma); internalized victim blaming; references to the children stuck in the Dark's domain during the apocalypse; suicidal thoughts (and allusions to past suicidal actions, but no details given); a bit of rejection sensitive dysphoria; vague reference to past abuse (Martin's mother) and comparing oneself to one's abuser; memory of a past discussion re: Martin slapping Jon during the apocalypse (wherein Martin apologized and Jon predictably tried to minimize it, which Martin shut right down); grief & loss.

Let me know if I missed anything!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The ghost comes back, because of course it does. Even a command from the Archive has a time limit. With enough practice, Jon might well be able to enhance that ability, learn to administer more complex and sustained compulsions. He has neither the need nor the desire to test those waters.

In the early days of the apocalypse, the Eye needled at the edges of his mind, hounding him to explore that untapped sea of potential. Ignoring that call was once an exercise in spite, requiring no small amount of effort and resolve. Here, now, the Eye is – for once in its rotten, protracted existence – mercifully subdued.

"Jon."

The apparition crouches down in front of him, sending up a little waft of dust as it settles onto its knees. Reflexively, Jon shrinks back. He clenches his teeth at the *wrongness* of it all, at this disturbance of a place that should be still and quiet and barren.

"...breaking ground that should be left burned and empty. And I've started to dream again–"

"–it wasn't a dream, though, or a vision. Everything had changed, and I was somewhere new. I don't know if that's true – maybe he was just trying to mess with my head or make a point–"

"–I could feel *a numbness in myself even as I looked at him. Was I finally becoming like them? My internal world melting away into nothing but a* pantomime–?"

"Listen, Jon, I…" Martin gnaws on his bottom lip in silence, agonizing over how to proceed. It's as if the two of them are perched on a precipice and a single word could mean the difference between coaxing Jon away from the edge and spurring him headlong off of it. "I know you're scared, and – and confused–"

Confused? Jon thinks, seething.

He's not sure if even *scared* is an apt descriptor anymore. There are so many shades of terror, a domain to suit nearly any niche combination of fears – and yet, there is nothing new under the roving Eye. The borders between the Fears have always been blurry, but over time it has become less a gradient and more a muddy smear, as if an overenthusiastic artist scrubbed a careless hand across their pallet. Every endless loop, every specialized domain, every lived experience – the routine has played out long enough to become flat and stale, and Jon has found that one can become habituated to almost anything once it becomes mundane. That process can be tectonically slow, to be sure, but time isn't as much of a limitation as it once was.

As for *confused*… well, the Eye forces certainty on him regardless of his feelings on the matter. There are very few things he cannot Know. These days, even the Spiral and the Stranger would have difficulty misleading him.

"I am not a fool," he snaps. *"I know well enough what this dream is likely to mean–"*

"–I know when I'm being handled–"

"–I know what it truly is–"

"–I know it's just phantom–"

"–toying with me–"

"You know, you know, you *know*," Martin says. *"How?* How can you be so sure?"

"I know this place and what you want, but I have no proof to give you. I have nothing that cannot be waved away as a bad dream."

"Have you asked the Eye?"

Jon's first impulse is to deny it. He promised not to deliberately Know things where Martin is concerned, and he never stopped respecting that boundary, right up until–

Until the end, Jon reminds himself. This isn't Martin. And this… *impostor's* next words prove it.

"You *could* Know, couldn't you? You could just… Look?"

"I know he's gone–"

"–I had plenty of time to mourn him – to reconcile myself to the fact that he was dead–"

"–I should be dead, really – I *should be dead – hard to reconcile yourself with avoiding a death that you feel should have been yours–"*

"–didn't know which of us was the lucky one–" Jon's voice fractures. *"Still don't, really."*

"Can you look at me, please? Just… see me, just for a minute?"

"What do you want?" Jon mumbles, studiously averting his eyes. *"To talk to a person who is not a person–? A person – who you should be fleeing?"*

It wouldn't be the first time that a monster asked him to See it, to set it free. But Jon very much doubts this is a monster at all. Just a memory. A convincing one, but a memory all the same.

"I am here, and I give you my words," he says, shifting to angle his body away. The choreographed disengagement is apparently lost on the specter, which follows the movement, shuffling to keep itself planted directly in front of Jon. *"They are all I have, and all you want, and perhaps when I am free of them I will be allowed to sleep."*

"Normally I'd be *ecstatic* to hear you say you want to sleep, but this isn't exactly an ideal spot for a nap. Not that the cots in the archives are comfortable either, but it's definitely better than curling up in…" Martin hesitates, then drags a finger through the powdered debris carpeting the ground and holds it up. "I'm going to regret asking, but what *is* this stuff, anyway?"

"The remains of–"

"–a ruined world – the nightmare landscape of a twisted world–"

"–the things we left behind – that's all it is, and we can't escape the ruins of our own future."

"Ugh," Martin says, wrinkling his nose and hastily wiping his hand off on his jumper.

"…the final days of humanity were unpleasant and visceral," the Archive continues, eager as ever to expound on the nightmare.

"…you could see a storm coming for miles, coming straight at you all across the horizon, looking near as anything like the end of the world – it promised to blot out everything–"

"–pulling us ever closer to a world of fire and loss, a place of burning and agony when we remade the world in the image of–"

"–the sick voyeur that lurks in this place–"

"Okay!" Martin interjects. "I get the picture–"

"–we'd all been touched and warped by proximity – but none of us had any special knowledge – he wanted a grand inferno, a ritual of apocalyptic burning – would create – one who could usher in this new world–"

"–catastrophic change. A change in our world that will wipe out what it means to be us, and leave something else in its place – will warp the world so much it kills us all – strip us of

what it means to be human, and leave us something alien and cold–"

The disapproval in Martin's sigh is piercing enough for Jon's words to catch in his throat, a surge of self-consciousness bringing heat to his cheeks. Martin takes advantage of the lull to break in with another appeal.

"I need you to listen to me now–"

"...I – I – I knew that I had meddled with something I should have left alone–"

"–had destroyed the place utterly. And yet – remained bound to it, tied *to it in some vital way – I have known anguish and destruction – but the memory of that night still makes me shudder. The sadness and the grief we felt at what we knew we had lost – the misery and pain he has brought upon himself–"*

"Please, Jon, can you just–"

"–the music calls a name that through the tears of half-grasped memories seems almost and eternally familiar – can you trust your eyes to tell you quite what it might be that dogs your steps – you tire of the chase of course, the fire and all-relentless pace of – reaching for a name, identity, and face that has long since worn through all reserves of hard, enduring vigor in you–"

"That's *enough!"*

It's loud, and sharp, and forceful enough that it stops Jon in his tracks just the same as the first time Martin established an embargo on the Archive's apocalyptic narration. For a split second, Jon expects to be struck–

Which is ridiculous. Ghosts don't have substance. Any attempt at physical contact would give away the ruse.

It's not something Jon should have expected from the real Martin, either. They had talked about that. At excruciating length. Jon remembers it *vividly*…

Things had been… tense – more so than usual – ever since leaving Callum Brodie's domain. Expected, but nonetheless disconcerting. On the one hand, Jon longed to break the silence. On the other, he dreaded what that might entail. He wasn't sure what would be worse: confronting what had just happened, or avoiding it altogether.

The reality of the situation remained the same regardless of whether they chose to acknowledge it. All the world's children had been condemned to hell, and the only thing Jon could think to do was… abandon them to their fate. A fate that he *brought about.*

'I want you to use your power!' *It had landed more like an accusation than a demand. Luckily, Martin did not seem to notice Jon's wince. 'I want you to help them – I want you to make things better!'*

In retrospect, Jon should have just said 'I can't' and left it at that.

What he said instead, sullen and venomous, was: 'There is no better *anymore.'*

It was true, and no amount of wishful thinking, remorse, or self-destruction would have changed that. But he should have known better than to be so bluntly pessimistic. Martin's response was predictable enough.

'You keep saying that, and I hate it!'

Jon should have apologized. He should have explained himself better. He should have let himself be vulnerable for once, because the alternative was–

‘I keep saying it because it keeps being true *– you* know *that!’*

It wasn’t until the words were out of his mouth that he realized how it sounded: dismissive, callous, indifferent to the terrified screams of children *– loud enough to his ears, louder still in his head.*

‘What I know *is that leaving children here is – it’s inexcusable! It’s monstrous!’*

Jon should have agreed then. He should have shown some sympathy. *But in the moment – floundering in a flood of fear that he could scarcely distinguish from his own, self-loathing inundating him that he could be dwelling on his own childhood trauma right then, when his nightmare was in the past; when he wasn’t even the one who got taken, just the bystander who watched it happen; when* these *children’s nightmares were happening in the present, ongoing, with no end in sight; when they wouldn’t be here now if the monster had just taken* him*–*

‘Martin,’ *he said, teetering on the edge of begging. ‘Tell me what you want me to do, and I will do it!’*

Martin knew as well as Jon did that there was only one thing he could *do. The only thing left to him in his monstrous existence.*

He gave a statement.

And then, more monstrous still, he walked away, leaving each and every one of those children to suffer their worst nightmares without a morsel of comfort or consolation.

They had been walking ever since, the silence between them palpable and festering. Eventually, Jon couldn’t take it anymore.

‘You’re being awfully quiet,’ he blurted out. It was only after he’d spoken that he registered how hoarse his voice was. How it took what was meant to be neutral and transformed it into

something gruff and jarring.

Martin didn't answer.

Understandable. Jon didn't much want his own company right then, either. So he resolved to keep his mouth shut. To give Martin the space he clearly needed.

Then he heard something that sounded worryingly like a sniffle. He stopped and turned on his heel to see Martin stood in place several paces behind him, his head lowered and his arms clutching his stomach protectively.

'Martin?' Jon rapidly closed the distance between them in a few long strides. 'What's wrong? Are you – are you hurt? Are you feeling ill?'

With Martin's chin dipped to his chest and his hair hanging down to shroud his eyes, Jon couldn't get a read on him. His instinct was to reach out, but at the first sign of movement, Martin recoiled – minutely, but still indisputably a flinch.

Right, *Jon thought. Martin probably didn't want that from him just then. Again, understandable.*

So Jon lowered his arms. They felt oddly heavy, hanging limp and useless at his sides, so he crossed them in front of himself instead, unconsciously mirroring Martin's slumping, round-shouldered stance.

'Sorry,' Jon mumbled inanely. It seemed unnecessary to specify for what. Everything, really. None of which was remotely remedied by yet another *apology.*

'No.' Martin's head snapped up, finally granting Jon a glimpse of his face. Of his eyes, glistening with tears. 'You shouldn't… I *should be apologizing to* you.'

'What?'

'I hurt you.' Martin's voice warbled, one hand going up to cover his mouth. His other arm stayed firmly pressed against his middle, his fingers clutching at his side. 'I… I hit *you.'*

Jon was momentarily flummoxed, unable to track Martin's thought process, until he recalled how they left off before.

Thank you for not hitting me this time, *Jon had sniped. It was a stupid thing for him to say – sulky, melodramatic, unnecessarily vindictive. A slap in the face, really, considering how Martin was still supporting him in spite of… everything. Everything he'd done; everything he* was–

And everything he wasn't. Everything he couldn't *do.*

'I… I'm so *sorry, Jon, I–' Martin's breath hiccuped. 'God, sorry doesn't even come* close *to–'*

'It's… fine,' Jon said wearily. 'I'm not angry. I'm not even upset–'

'You should be!'

'Well, I'm not.' Jon scuffed one foot against the ground. 'It's not a big deal. Honestly, I shouldn't have said anything at all. If anything, I owe you an apology.'

'What?' *Martin yelped.*

'It was… petty of me, to bring it up like that. You didn't deserve that.'

'Jon,' Martin said tremulously, 'what are you talking about?'

‘I was just… on edge, and lashing out in the heat of the moment.’ A self-deprecating smile flickered and died on Jon’s lips. ‘Old habits, I suppose.’

‘Wh– I’m the one who hit you!’

‘Not that hard.’

Never too hard. Never enough to hurt. Just enough to snap him out of it.

Martin gaped at him, looking – disproportionately, in Jon’s opinion – horrified. ‘Jon!’

‘What? It wasn’t. Not like you threw a punch.’

‘That doesn’t matter! I still hurt you!’ Martin began to pace, back and forth, scraping his hand through his hair. His fingers kept catching on the tangled curls in a way that looked painful. ‘And now you’re excusing it, and – and – and trying to comfort me *for what* I *did–’*

‘Martin, it–’ Jon watched as Martin ruthlessly yanked his fingers through another knot. He must have misinterpreted Jon’s sympathetic wince, because it only seemed to make him more distraught. ‘I promise, it really, truly wasn’t as bad as you’re – as I *made it out to be.’*

‘I’ve also heard you say that about – about getting eaten by worms, or – or – or kidnapped by–’

They were veering dangerously close to a conversational minefield.

‘Can we just–’ Jon cut himself off as soon as he registered his sharp tone. Being tetchy wouldn’t help anything. ‘I mean this in the nicest possible way, but can we please just… drop it and move on?’

'No, we really can't,' Martin said, his eyes wide and beseeching. He finally stopped abusing his scalp, lowering his hand to his side. 'You… you know you didn't deserve that, right?'

He took one careful step forward – hesitantly, as if he expected Jon to back away – and then reached out, just as slowly. In the few seconds it took for Jon to recognize the intent – to process the fact that Martin would want to be anywhere near him right then, let alone touch him – Martin started to pull back, presumably interpreting the delay as reluctance. Before he could retract the offer entirely, Jon hurriedly grabbed his hands, grateful – albeit guiltily so – that Martin could still find it in himself to care.

'Jon, I…' Martin stared down at their linked hands with a perplexing sense of wonder. 'I need you to understand that you don't deserve to be hurt.'

His gaze wandered to Jon's neck, lingering there – and suddenly, it was too much for Jon.

'Honestly, Martin, a gentle slap to the face isn't exactly the same caliber as a knife to the throat.'

'That's not the–!' Martin's throat bobbed, as if he was swallowing back tears. 'I don't want you to ever *have to look at something I did and compare it to what's been done to you. To minimize it, to – to say it doesn't matter because it's not as bad as literal* torture. *After everything you've been through, you deserve to be treated gently. You deserve to expect better from someone who loves you. I never want you to have to be afraid of me–'*

Jon couldn't help it – he laughed. The idea that, of the two of them, Martin *was the one to fear…*

'Sorry, I'm not making fun, I just…' Jon took a breath, schooling himself before he continued. 'You haven't traumatized me, and frankly, it's absurd to think otherwise. All of those other things – they were meant *to hurt, to scar, and – I know you'd never intentionally hurt me. You're not like that.'*

‘Apparently I am,’ Martin said feebly.

Jon caught a fleeting glimpse of a thought just then – bitter memories of a mother so caught up in the mantra of ‘like father, like son’ that she never stopped to consider that he might take after her–

‘No,’ Jon said firmly. ‘That’s not you. I know *you wouldn’t… do something like that, if things were normal. I mean’ – he allowed himself a nervous chuckle – ‘if anything qualifies as extenuating circumstances, it’s the apocalypse–’*

‘Stop making excuses for me!’ Martin erupted. ‘Hitting you never *should have crossed my mind, let alone actually following through on it –* multiple times, *and not even as a last resort–!’*

‘It’s probably the quickest, most straightforward way to snap me out of it,’ Jon protested – a bit too frantically to pass as matter-of-fact. ‘It’s effective.’

Martin stared at the ground. ‘But you didn’t like it, did you?’

‘It didn’t hurt.’

‘But it didn’t make you feel good, *either.’*

Before he could think better of it, Jon muttered: ‘Most things don’t, these days.’

It was exactly the sort of insensitive, unwelcome cynicism that caused their earlier row, and Jon steeled himself for the inevitable backlash. But it didn’t come.

‘Yeah,’ Martin said faintly. ‘And that’s exactly why I shouldn’t be adding more bad things to the pile.’

‘It’s the end of the world, Martin. You didn’t sign up for this–’

‘Neither did you–’

‘And it’s understandable,’ *Jon carried on, ‘that you might sometimes do, or – or say things that you wouldn’t, if things weren’t so…’ He trailed off. There was no apt descriptor for what the world had become. No word that could fully capture the enormity of the nightmare he had unleashed. ‘I don’t hold it against you.’*

‘I’m still sorry. And I’m not asking you to forgive me.’

‘I don’t think there’s anything to forgive–’

‘Funny. You didn’t take it well when I said the same thing, when you kept apologizing for how you used to treat me.’

‘That’s not the same thing. You didn’t do anything to deserve my treatment of you back then. Your only crime was getting assigned to the Archives – against your will, at that, because Elias – Jonah *– was scheming. I hadn’t been traipsing through an apocalyptic wasteland; I didn’t have to snap you out of some sort of – sadistic voyeur trance. It was just me being a prick, and you being too quick to forgive.’*

Martin breathed a surprised laugh. ‘Is that really what you think?’

Jon tilted his head, which only seemed to add to Martin’s amusement.

‘Jon, I’m so good at holding a grudge I could’ve put it on my CV. Would’ve been the only true thing on there, if I had.’

‘W-well,’ Jon stammered, taken aback. ‘You… you’ve always been too quick to forgive me.’

‘If anything, this entire conversation has proven that it’s reciprocal.’

Jon found himself unable to muster a response to that.

‘Look, it’s no secret that neither of us has stellar self-esteem. You’re a terrible judge of what you deserve, and you obviously think the same of me. So if we’re both so bad at being kind to ourselves, maybe we should just… do our best to take care of each other?’ Martin squeezed Jon’s hands. ‘I treated you less kindly than you deserve – don’t argue – and I want to do better. I’m going *to do better.’*

‘Me too,’ Jon said – and then, upon seeing Martin open his mouth to retort: ‘Don’t argue.’

Martin smiled and rolled his eyes in a ‘point taken’ sort of way.

‘Okay, then let’s… let’s do what we should have done in the first place.’ Martin’s thumbs started to knead the back of Jon’s hands, moving in repetitious little circles. It was a habitual gesture, and Jon had long suspected that the soothing effect was mutual. ‘Sometimes, you get lost in a statement, and I don’t know what to do. It… scares me – and not for the reasons you think. I start to worry that you won’t come back, and I’ll have to survive this all on my own–’

Jon suddenly felt cold all over. ‘Martin–’

‘I know you’d never leave me alone here,’ Martin reassured. ‘Not on purpose. I’m just afraid that one of these times, you’ll get lost – or, you’ll lose yourself and not be able to find your way back to me. I start thinking about what it was like before – mourning you, thinking I’d lost you for good – and I just… I panic. But I can’t keep taking a shortcut that I know hurts you, s-so…’ He worried his lip for a few seconds before meeting Jon’s eyes. ‘How can I help?’

“–okay?” Jon opens his eyes to see the thing that sounds like Martin staring at him. The thing that *looks* like Martin, with the same concerned furrow between its brows and the same earnest eyes and even the same *hands,* one suspended uncertainly in the air between them. “Are you… are you back with me now?”

Right now, Jon doesn’t want to be anywhere – not in a memory, not in the present, not in his own skin. His thoughts are too heavy for him to hold his head up, so he leans forward instead, resting his forehead against his bony knees.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have shouted, I just…” The ghost sighs. “I know it seems like this is all there is. Like nothing will ever change. But it *did. You* changed it. You found a way to turn the world back. You just… don’t remember right now.”

“…we all – we all knew he was a liar*–”*

“And,” Martin plows on, “I know it feels *right*, being here. I know it feels like nothing can touch you here – like if nothing can reach you, nothing can hurt you, and you’ll be safe.”

“There is a place, deep in the heart of fear,” Jon says, letting his eyes drift shut as the statement sweeps him away, *“where you trap yourself and claim that it is safety – you sit in your meager comfort and belief of security with nothing to do, nothing to distract your mind from the agonies that lie just beyond your window. And those diversions you* do *find will offer no relief – but simply numb the mind into mournful nostalgia for a time when the world you inhabited seemed to make* sense…”

“Y-yeah.” Jon raises his head to see one corner of Martin’s mouth tick up into a smile – weak and weary, soft and sad, but nonetheless fond and achingly familiar. “Feels like even the *fear* is gentle here, doesn’t it?”

“…but the place knows this comfort to be a lie,” Jon says acidly, *“and laces upon it instead the awful fear of losing what you have – of it being stripped away by the chaos that waits for you beyond the walls.”*

“Exactly.” This time, Martin’s sigh is one of relief rather than disappointment, but it knocks Jon off-kilter just the same. He curls in on himself more tightly, shrinking himself as small as possible, and wishes fruitlessly that he could make himself disappear entirely. He settles for hiking his shoulders up to his ears, half-hiding behind his knees, and steadfastly ignoring the way Martin keeps trying to catch his eye. “It’s – it’s a lie. The Lonely *lies.* You’re the one who told me that, remember?”

What does it matter if it’s a lie? It’s not like there’s anything promising waiting for him outside of this place.

There never was.

It was a mistake to leave the cabin, Jon knows now. The comfort it promised was an illusion, true, but was it any worse than what awaited them outside its walls? It would have destroyed them eventually, but might they have at least had more time together? Would it have been worth it? Months, weeks, days, even an *hour* – wouldn’t it have been worth it?

“It is afraid of what it has become and where it might be going–”

“–I’ve always been running, always hiding, caught in someone else’s trap, but – but now–”

“–there seemed a safety in stillness, as though inaction could do no harm. It was the first good decision I had made, and there isn’t a day goes by I don’t curse myself for–”

“–surviving encounters which had killed far braver souls–”

“–to make it through all fourteen–”

“–throwing open any door I had not yet seen behind–”

“–trying to convince ourselves we had any hope of outrunning the storm. We did not–”

“Look at me, Jon.”

“…I couldn’t see this man. Obviously I couldn’t. I couldn’t see him or hear him or speak to him. Because… there was nobody there–”

“Can you just – shut the Archive off for a minute? Talk to me, like earlier?”

Jon’s attention seizes on that last word – *earlier.* The Archive hasn’t relinquished its stranglehold on his voice since the first moment it fully claimed its place – a much longer reign than *earlier* implies. Once, he might have followed up on that incongruity. As he is now, it’s easy to cast it aside.

“…a slow movement of your jaw, your lips, forming your mouth into words–”

“–a way of taking your thoughts, the very makeup of yourself, and giving them to another. Putting your thoughts in the mind of someone else – corruption between your mind and that of the listener–”

“–it barely even sounded human as it – as it spoke in a strange monotone–”

“–didn’t whisper but every word was quiet, as though it was a real effort to get them out – but was definitely words, the same words over and over–”

Yet another loud sigh interrupts the monologue. Jon resists the urge to look up, to determine whether the specter’s scowl is as convincing an impersonation as the rest of its act.

“–simple – s-simple vibrations that vanish almost as soon as they are created, though if they find a host, then they can lodge there, proliferate, and maybe spread further–”

“Hey…” There’s an indignant, accusatory note to the word, and this time Jon *does* chance a glimpse, his curiosity getting the better of him. Martin is still sat in the same place – at a barely acceptable distance, *almost* too close for comfort – but he’s leaning forward now, his chin resting on one fist, the other hand cupping his elbow. “That jumper looks familiar.”

It’s such an abrupt, bizarre *non sequitur* that Jon’s response – whatever dismissal the Archive had at the ready – fizzles out. There must be some human left in him yet, because he immediately succumbs to the awkward impulse to look down and double-check what he’s wearing the moment his attention is drawn to it.

“In fact… I think I have one *just* like that, right down to that little snag on the sleeve. Caught it on the corner of a filing cabinet drawer the first week I was working in the basement–” Jon

glances back up to see Martin's hand go to his chest in a show of faux outrage. "Jon, did you nick it from me when I wasn't looking?"

Jon readies a denial, but admittedly he does – *did* – have a habit of stealing clothes. It's just… he was never good at picking out *comfortable* clothes for himself. It's not his fault that Georgie had such excellent taste in product for her podcast merch, or that Martin has – *had* – a serendipitous affinity for precisely the types of materials that Jon can tolerate touching his skin for long periods of time.

Anyway, Martin always *liked* when Jon wore his clothes. Moreover, this particular jumper isn't even one that Jon *stole.*

"…borrowed," Jon says primly. *"I held onto it–"*

"–already had that permission–"

"–I hadn't thought much of it, but here it was – all those years later."

"Hmm…" Martin squints. "Seems in pretty good shape, doesn't it?"

Jon stares down at himself again, mystified and increasingly indignant about this pointless line of questioning.

"For something you've been dragging through an apocalyptic hellscape, I would've expected to see more wear and tear is all."

"…the maddened illusion that hides the sick squirming reality of what I am. Of what we all are, when you strip away the pretense–"

"–visions, hallucinations or dreams–"

"Well, let's see…" The ghost starts counting off on its fingers, just the same as Martin used to do whenever he was gearing up for a spat. "You can't predict the future, so this isn't a vision. You told me you weren't able to sleep after the change, so that rules out dreams. Which

leaves hallucinations, and… do you *really* think the Lonely would let you hallucinate some nice, comfortable clothes to brood in? Why would it bother?"

There's a smug, victorious grin on its face now – the same one Martin used to get when he made a valid point in one of their trivial, good-humored squabbles, one that he *knew* would leave Jon speechless or stammering, unable to formulate a rebuttal. It's endearing – or it *was,* and it *would be* if this was Martin, but *this isn't Martin,* and Jon has had enough of this charade.

"…it has been freeing, talking to you, but not enough to free me from my fate – it's just a memory – a daydream – it won't last forever–"

"–there's nowhere I can go, a place I can hide that it doesn't keep looking at me – those unseen eyes that hover everywhere and won't let me rest–"

"Eyes!" Martin blurts out, jabbing an excited finger in Jon's direction. "You've got two of them!"

Jon stares blankly at the fingertip pointing at his face. Martin's cheeks instantly redden. He coughs lightly and slowly lowers his hand.

"You, uh… you've mentioned before that you sort of – sprouted a bunch more of them? During the apocalypse?" he says uncertainly. "Okay, 'sprouted' wasn't the word you used, I just sort of imagined–" He shakes his head, as if to banish a mental image. "In my defense, you didn't *explain.* You make a *lot* of ominous side comments, and it's hard to tell when you're being cryptic on accident and when you're actually avoiding a sore subject, so–"

Apparently gaslighting isn't just the Spiral's specialty. Rapidly losing patience for the asinine twists and turns this conversation keeps taking, Jon brandishes his hands, putting the hateful array of Watchers on full display. Martin's only response is to raise an eyebrow, which only serves to stoke Jon's temper.

"And I tell them to look again at – our wretched eyes that bind us to this grotesque world in which we live – at the pain and suffering and misery that it brings with it–"

"–look into their eyes for just a second, and see the emptiness inside–"

“I’m looking.” Martin gives an indicative nod. “Are *you?”*

With a huff, Jon follows Martin’s line of sight, even though he already knows what he’ll see staring back at him: a horde of bottomless black hole pupils hemmed with toxic, incandescent green, far more numerous than the worm scars ever were–

“…and his eyes were missing,” he murmurs.

Reality collapses on top of him all at once: he cannot *see*. Or – he *can,* by a certain, limited definition of the word, but the scope of his vision has shrunken, now constricted to a narrow span directly in front of him. Compared to what he was – what he *has been* for ages, for far longer than he was human – he’s functionally blind.

That transition does not happen in real time; rather, it has already happened, and he’s only now become cognizant of it, in the blink of an eye *(or two, or ten, or dozens–)*

How did it happen? *When* did it happen? How could he not have noticed such a drastic change as it was happening?

“…but – but they stared at me,” Jon says weakly, flipping his hands to check his palms, as if they simply migrated somehow, then again to inspect the backs. *“They* saw *me. Believe or dismiss anything else – but I swear to you–”*

“–were there such a short time ago – vanished–”

He wrenches one sleeve up to the crook of his elbow, then the other, scrutinizing his exposed forearms and picking uncomprehendingly at the places where eyes *should* be. It feels as if the ground has caved beneath him, stealing away his breath along with his words as surely as any freefall.

He wonders if this is how Lee Rentoul felt when he woke up one morning to find yet another piece of him missing, inexplicably vanished overnight.

"…I felt a jolt of fear because I – I knew they went further, went deeper than would show on my skin–"

"They aren't there anymore, Jon. The world isn't ending anymore. You stopped it–"

Jon shakes his head fervently.

"It is too late. It has always been too late–"

"–the night outside showed no sign of ending–"

"–and as you lie in agonies and fading dreams of personhood, of knowing who you were and what that might have meant, you hear the bitter whisper of recriminating seekers who–"

Martin's soothing demeanor slips as he throws his head back with a muttered, "Christ, you're stubborn."

"Close your eyes," Jon says, and he does just that. *All two of them,* he thinks, and then shakes his head again to banish the reminder. *"Ignore the sounds–"*

"One minute you're all, 'I witnessed all laws and universal constants crumble beneath the weight of incomprehensible powers, who knows if *anything* is categorically impossible,'" Martin says, putting on the melodramatic, playfully mocking air he would summon whenever he determined that Jon was being too *ominous.* "And *now* you want to play the skeptic again."

"…can you trust your eyes – and stake it all on one last hope, your bruised feet pounding to the edge – your intended line of best retreat – but no, for all the dreams of bounding, leaping off into the great unknown, you see the – sting that comes with such rejection of the truth – that there is no way off the merry-go-round–"

“Just stop and *think* for a second. What reason could the Lonely possibly have for giving you a single *scrap* of comfort?”

“–your face is not your face is not your face–”

“Jon,” Martin says sternly.

What little was left of Jon’s tested patience shatters. His head snaps up and a single, irate question trips off of his tongue: “What?!”

“There you are,” Martin says, a wry – affectionate, *affecting* – curve to his mouth now. “If I knew that *annoying* you would be enough to snap you out of it, I’d have doubled down on it sooner. Guess I should’ve known. You *did* tell me as much – me and Georgie.”

Georgie?

Jon hasn’t seen Georgie since… since he barged into her home to drag Melanie back into all of this against her will. And… that’s exactly what he did in the end, didn’t he? Dragged *everyone* into it. Georgie made it abundantly clear that she wanted nothing to do with him. She was right not to, and he couldn’t even grant her *that.*

He’s never gained the ability to See either of them, but there was a time when he would turn his mind to them, if only to Know whether or not they were still alive. He stopped checking ages ago. Though he tells himself that it’s to give them whatever small measure of privacy is still attainable in a world turned into the Beholding’s playground, the real reason is not nearly so altruistic.

The plain truth is that he knows he will outlive them. He has no desire to Know when or how they will meet – *have met?* – their ends. If he does not ask the question, hopefully the Eye will spare him the answer. It’s bound to cram the knowledge into his head at some point, of course, but he would rather ward it off as long as possible.

"…the reconciliation I'd hoped for never really came–"

"You told us that you had given up. That you sort of… wallowed in the Lonely for a bit – your words, not mine – but it wouldn't have you. Then Helen riled you into storming the Panopticon. Well" – Martin seems to preen, the pink flush on his cheeks deepening in time with his slowly-spreading smile – "the way you told it, she was having a go at me and you took it upon yourself to defend my honor – which, I'm flattered, by the way, I don't think I ever–"

"What – are – you – *talking* about?" Jon forces out through gritted teeth.

"Jon," Martin says – and he edges closer, just a bit, before he remembers himself. It seems he's making a valiant – if poor – attempt to hide his buzzing eagerness. "Can you repeat what you just said?"

"I…" Jon gulps. The dampened panic prowling the perimeter of his mind is creeping closer and closer, his heartbeat approaching a gallop. *Something isn't right,* alarm bells screech in his head, louder and louder every second. Something is *off,* he can't pinpoint what it is, and it has the Archive in him gnashing its teeth. "I asked what the hell you're on about."

"Yeah, you did. *You* did. Not the Archive, Jon. *You."*

What.

"I–" Jon falters, his stomach swooping as if he just missed a step going down the stairs. "What? No. *What–?"*

"You were using your own voice earlier, too."

There's that word again. "Earlier…?"

“Couldn’t have been more than fifteen minutes ago. Just before you sent me away?” Martin gives him an expectant look – as though they have a shared understanding of reality between them, as though Jon can possibly contextualize whatever irrational premises Martin is operating on. “I… don’t think you realized the implications at the time.”

“Th-that’s not…” Jon presses the heels of his palms against his eyes, leaning into the pressure. “No, that – that doesn’t make *sense.* When did – how – why *now,* when it – it’s been so long–”

Could he have done it all along? Has he just been *letting it happen* all this time, submitting to the monster and telling himself that he had no choice?

It wouldn’t be the first time, would it?

“It hasn’t, though. Not really, or – not as long as you *think,* at least. A little over a week, actually – which is a *long* time to be stuck here,” Martin hastens to add, “I know, I don’t mean to minimize it, or–”

“I don’t *understand.”*

The tight sensation in Jon’s chest intensifies as he tries to regain solid footing on the shifting quicksand of the moment. Trying to follow Martin’s reasoning is like trying to make sense of a dream. It’s not like the nightmare logic of the Fears, though. More like attempting to navigate barely-lucid dream, aware enough to realize that events aren’t following an expected narrative, but not enough to pinpoint why – or to determine what the expected narrative even *should* be.

“Peter threw you into the Lonely, remember?” It’s not the condescending sort of placating; not the *it-was-only-a-dream* dismissal of a longsuffering guardian shooing a child back to bed, brimming with barely-suppressed irritation after so many consecutive nights of disturbed sleep. “He put you here because he thought it was his only chance to make me cooperate. And… I guess it likes to mirror whatever makes you feel the most… well, lonely. Makes sense it would go for the apocalypse. I’ve noticed it’s not keen on *subtlety–”*

“No, this is – why are you here? *How* are you here? You – you *can’t be here*. I – I *lost* you, I *watched it happen* and I – I couldn’t do anything to stop it, and I still can’t – can’t do *anything.* If I could have followed you, I would have. I’ve *tried,* but the Eye took that from me, same as everything else, and I don’t know if…” Jon trails off as a feeble breath shudders out of him. “I want to hope that there’s something… *after*, but I don’t know. I don’t *Know.”*

Such things are beyond the Eye’s purview. But there are no cosmic forces of hope or love to balance out the Fears. Why would life after death – if such a thing exists at all – be any different? Ideally, there’s at least nothing *worse* waiting on the other side; realistically, the best he dares to hope for is for nothing at all to be waiting on the other side. Nearly any change – even oblivion – would be a welcome reprieve from the living hell currently raging on earth.

Sometimes, he wonders whether oblivion would actually be the kindest option. It’s always followed by a twinge of guilt – of *course* he would give anything to see Martin again, of *course* he would be overjoyed for his cynicism to be proven wrong – but sometimes…

Sometimes he feels threadbare. Like a ragdoll forced into motion, no life of his own left to animate him, no corner of his mind left intact, no personal identity left to salvage. He doesn’t want to *think* anymore, he doesn’t want to *be* anything, he doesn’t want to be seen or known or remembered–

He just wants to rest. It’s selfish – and unearned – but that doesn’t stop him wanting it.

“…doesn’t get to die for that – gets to live, trapped and helpless, and entombed forever – I am without him now – fading, weak, no reason to move – powerless to help–”

“–this is reality. I dream, sometimes, perhaps this is the illusion–”

“–I tried to listen, to nod, but his eyes were hollow, and I knew that he wasn’t really there. I could run, of course, but I won’t. Where would I run to? All the world’s a stage, and I can’t escape my monologue–”

“–it doesn’t matter. At that moment, seeing those bound corpses before me, I made the decision to take no action ever again–”

“–over the course of several years, he stopped being able to move under his own power – it had been all he was for so long–”

"–I barely recognized myself – he looked at me with – helpless terror, as though I could do something to fix it – I have not fought since I – saw the true scale of the devastation–"

"But you *did,*" Martin insists. "You confronted the Eye."

"I will admit that in my heart I nurtured such dreams of revenge–"

"–was planning to try and rescue those trapped in the wreckage, but maybe she was simply trying to join them–"

"–in the end it is what it is, and I'm just going to have to live with it–"

"–whatever fight was left in me at the beginning is gone – now it's just a memory – I've forgotten the taste of determination–"

"And then you found it again," Martin counters. "You… you're so much stronger than you think, Jon."

"Stronger than anything has any right to be," Jon scoffs.

"That's not the kind of strength I'm talking about." Martin regards him with a wistful expression. "I wish you could see yourself the way I see you."

"And how is that? What is there to see? When you strip away the Eye, what's left behind?" Jon demands. The bitter, scornful laugh that wrenches itself out of him borders on cruel-sounding. "Go on. Tell me what you *actually* see."

"I see *you.*" Martin pauses, staring pensively at his hands as he gathers his thoughts. They remain tightly folded in his lap, one thumbnail digging repeatedly into the cuticle of the other. "I see… I see someone who has had to shoulder so *much* – more than anyone should ever be expected to carry – for *so long*, all alone. The things you've seen, everything you've been through – you could have let it make you cold, or heartless, but you didn't. You… you've survived so much, lost *everything,* and still you found it in yourself to keep going–"

“I don’t have a *choice!”*

He had one chance to die. He chose wrong. Now he has to live with it whether he likes it or not.

“Maybe you didn’t have the option to die, but you had a choice whether to fight back, and you *did.* And you didn’t choose to be here now.”

“Stop saying that!” Jon twists his fingers in his hair. *“None of this* makes sense–”

“Why not? Talk me through it.”

“B-because – because that’s not how the world *works* anymore!” Jon says, his voice ragged with anguish. A few strands of hair snap away from his scalp as he tightens his grip. “The only currency this place has, the *only* thing with any coherence, or – or – or staying power is *fear.* Anything that promises comfort is a *lie*, a – a *ruse.* There’s no room *left* for kindness – there’s barely enough room left for the Fears. In the end there won’t be room left for anything at all, and the End can’t come soon enough.”

“I know–”

“No, you *don’t* know!” He never did. And given what it would have required for Martin to truly understand… Jon would never have wished that upon him. *“You* didn’t speak the words. You couldn’t *See* the extent of what I did–”

“What *Jonah* did–”

“I’m the one who opened the door! And if I had the power to end it all now – *all* of it, scorch the earth and leave it a barren rock – I *would,* and it would be a mercy.” There’s a dull pain building in the back of Jon’s throat. Swallowing hard, he releases his grasp on his hair so he can hide his face in his hands instead. “Miracles don’t happen. Not before, and certainly not now. There’s no *better* anymore. Just… this.”

“What about your voice?”

“What about it?” Jon says peevishly.

“Well, having it back – that’s an improvement, right?”

“For now, maybe. Until it’s gone again. And that’s how the Lonely operates, isn’t it?” Jon’s shoulders slump as all the fight rushes out of him, weary melancholy taking its place. “I never got to say goodbye before. Not in my own words. As *me.* So the Lonely conjures up a substitute, gives me a chance to pretend for a moment, because stale grief is nothing compared to dashed hopes. It’s one thing to dwell on loss. It’s quite another to find something you thought you’d lost, only to…”

“To lose it again,” Martin says. One hand drifts to his chest, clutching at his jumper just over his heart.

“I already lost you,” Jon corrects. “And even though I know this won’t give me closure, even though I *know* it’s just a setup, to – to reopen the wound, make me relive that moment, I still go along with it, because I… I *miss* you. I miss you just the same now as I did when I lost you, and it…” The broken little noise that slips out of him falls far short of a chuckle. “Well, even if time *did* heal all wounds, time doesn’t really *work* anymore, so.”

“I… I was lost, yeah. But I didn’t stay that way. You didn’t *let* me stay that way.” Martin keeps moving, leaning forward and tilting his head, chasing after eye contact in response to Jon’s every effort to avert his gaze. “I was afraid of the same thing, you know. I’d already lost you once. Already grieved for you. Letting you back in… it meant opening myself up to the possibility over going through it all over again. But *not* letting you back in would have meant abandoning you, and…” He smiles – the sort of half-wry, half-sheepish grin of someone preparing to tell a joke that might not land. “Better to have loved and lost, right?”

Jon’s brain briefly short-circuits before he splutters out, “Are you quoting *Tennyson* at me right now?”

“I guess it was too much to hope you’d misattribute it to Shakespeare,” Martin grouses. “Look, you’re an ex-theatre kid who hates poetry. Doesn’t leave me much to work with. Anyway, what’s wrong with Tennyson? Too sentimental? Too depressing? Or just too” – his voice takes on a disdainful tenor, but Jon can see the way he’s fighting a grin – *“obviously enamored with Keats?”*

“Too *Victorian*,” Jon says, surrendering to the fleeting humor of the moment. Once again, the involuntary noise that forces its way out of him hardly qualifies as a laugh. It nonetheless seems to encourage Martin, who brightens, sitting up straighter.

“You found me,” he says, “and now it’s my turn. We’ve found each other again and again and again, and I see no reason to stop now. Although… maybe after this we can stop losing each other in the first place.”

“We already have,” Jon murmurs, the glimmer of playfulness dissipating the moment he remembers the truth of the matter. “You’ve finally gone somewhere I can’t reach you.”

Martin presses his lips together as if he’s biting back a retort. He takes a measured breath before he speaks.

“That’s enough talking in circles,” he says. “You can Know anything–”

The brusque rejoinder is automatic: *“Almost* anything.”

“So *ask me.* Ask me whether I’m telling the truth.” Martin sighs at Jon’s answering silence. “I’m giving you permission, I’m *asking* you to, so–”

“Why?” Jon narrows his eyes in suspicion. What the Lonely could possibly hope to achieve by prolonging this convoluted ploy? “What’s there to be gained?”

“What’s there to lose?” Martin counters.

Nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing–

"Fine," Jon snarls. "Fine!"

If the Lonely wants to play this game, the least Jon can do is make it *hurt.*

"Tell me," he says, static crackling in his throat. ***"Tell me the truth."***

Chapter End Notes

jon's just like "do you ever get so annoyed at the ghosts of your past that you momentarily forget you're an archive"

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- Archive-speak citations: 059/030/122; 138/150/152/150/031; 074; 075/007/051/007; 074; 074; 133/160/149; 134/099/139/135; 139/134; 037/139; 165; 084; 162; 162; 162/117/020/167/160/127/099; 085; 020/017/144/012; 017; 014/035/014; 032/011; 096/060; 135/122; 023; 023/168; 091; 168/029/165; 162; 165; 165; 077; 128/020/108/020/136/105; 140/107/083/096; 053; 001/126/057; 047; 047; 004; 047; 004; 001/044.
- Some of the dialogue in the flashback re: what happened in Callum Brodie's domain (up to 'tell me what you want me to do and I will do it') is from 173.
- There's a canon line in 159 - *"It feels right. Nothing hurts here. It's just quiet. Even the fear is gentle here."* - that I borrowed for this chapter, but rephrased to fit the context & role reversal, so if some of it sounds familiar, that's why.

- "Give me a week or two," they said. "The chapter's almost done," they said. "No way it'll take me an entire month," they said.
Anyways, this was supposed to be the second half of LAST chapter, yet when I finished this up, it was once again too long (and had too much stuff happening in the latter part), so I split it into two again. Just consider this the lead-up; next chapter's the resolution. And this time, I mean it when I say the next chapter will be up in a week or two, lol. It's actually done, I'm just gonna hold off on posting it for a bit so I can get a head start on Chapter 34.

- Thank you so much for reading and for bearing with my sporadic updates! I'll probably reply to comments from last chapter over the next few days or so.

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

Ultimatum

Chapter Notes

CWs for Chapter 33: mental confusion & dissociation/dpdr; anxiety & panic symptoms; some passive suicidal ideation; themes of grief & loss; internalized victim blaming & guilt; trauma related to loss of autonomy & feelings of violation (specifically, descriptions of being forced to read Jonah's statement); Lonely & Hunt themes; a hostage situation; threats of violence and actual knife violence, including graphic descriptions of blood & fatal injury; subsequent character death (dw, JM & co. are fine); a bit of Flesh-typical grisliness.

(I'm actually adding a new **Graphic Depictions of Violence** warning tag to the overall fic because while there has been violent imagery in previous chapters, I think this is more graphic than usual and occurs in the present-tense.)

Let me know if I missed anything!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What happens next is… unexpected.

Channeling the Ceaseless Watcher has long since become second nature, requiring little effort on Jon's part. Fury drives him to put more force into this particular command than he has bothered to in a very, *very* long time. It should have been enough to hurt – potent enough to hurt *himself,* scalding his throat on its way out – but the brutal zeal he has come to expect from the Eye isn't there.

It's still compulsion; still leaves a buzz on his lips and a heavy, charged feeling in the air; still makes the hair on the back of his neck stand on end as a shiver skitters up and down his spine. But the connection feels weaker than it has for… Jon can't even remember. Doesn't know how long he's been here, let alone when that connection began to wane or how long the process took.

Even so, there's enough power behind the compulsion to garner *some* sort of reaction. Yet, the ghost doesn't so much as wince. It simply… answers. Its speech isn't pressured or harried; its expression isn't fearful or pained. The desperate resistance that typically accompanies such a compulsion is conspicuously missing.

“I’ve *been* telling you the truth,” the ghost says. Prompt, as if the answer is so self-evident that it requires no preamble. Succinct, as if the claim is so ordinary that it doesn’t bear consideration. Unnervingly composed, as if the words are freely given rather than torn from the recesses of its mind. “I know it might seem like this will go on forever, but it doesn’t.”

Is that supposed to be a consolation? To make the wait any less torturous?

“I am *aware,*” Jon says scathingly, “that everything ends eventually.”

“Sure, but not here. Not like this.”

“You’re *lying*–”

“You just compelled me; how could I be lying?”

Jon’s lips move soundlessly for a minute before he manages to formulate a response. “B-because if you’re just a figment of my imagination, then – then why would compulsion even have any effect?”

“That’s a weak excuse and you know it. Don’t you think you’d notice if you were trying to compel thin air?”

Much as Jon wants to refute it, the answer is, quite simply, a resounding *yes.* The line he cast hooked *something,* and although it didn’t fight him when he reeled it in, there was still a heft to it. Behind the words was something solid and real – the undeniable and staggering existence of another mind, exuding presence where there should have been only absence.

“You asked me a question, so stop shutting me down and *listen.*” A fierce glower from the Archive might be enough to discourage most. Martin doesn’t bat an eye. “You went to the Panopticon.”

Jon tosses a furtive glance at the tower in the distance. Its call has been incessant since the beginning of the end. Or… *had* been? He's learned to tune it out to an extent, but it has still always been there, *waiting,* a noisy interloper thrashing at the edges of his consciousness. Now that he's actually devoting attention to it, he becomes acutely aware of how quiet it has become. It doesn't give so much as a tug, as if it has finally resigned itself to the fact that its Archive has no intentions of–

–standing at the center of a room disintegrating under its own weight: recessed prison cells little more than collapsing alcoves, vacant tombs framed by time-eaten brick and corroded bars now more rust than iron–

The thought wasn't spoken aloud – at least, Jon doesn't *think* it was – but he claps a hand to his mouth anyway, reeling from the intrusion just the same.

"You Saw the Eye," Martin continues.

–watching from the epicenter of a world constrained by a moldering tapestry of dead-end instinct and recycled, near-depleted fear, its once-vibrant patterns graying and fraying at the edges–

"It pointed you to Hill Top Road–"

–plucking at a single taut strand hidden within a knot of tangled threads, nearly lost amongst the slackened tatters; taking hold, following its trail, unraveling it from the rest along the way–

"–and when you got there, you…" Martin falters. "W-well, you didn't really go into all the details, but–"

"…my memory of the trip back is fragmented, and I have only faint impressions–" Jon stops abruptly, unsure of where *that* came from.

"You remember?" Something in Martin's tone – an undercurrent of anxiety mingled with hope – grates uncomfortably. It embeds itself in Jon's chest, plays tug-o-war with his breath, and loops around his heart, alternately prodding and pulling and compressing. His mind *itches,* like something is trying to worm its way out.

"There was something else." Jon squints as he tries to dissect his unease. *"Something* under *the fear–"*

"–a huge shape, a shadow surrounding it on all sides; getting darker, getting closer, coming up from deep, deep below the surface–"

"–something to be dug up, rooted out, buried within – to reach it, to approach that source, that rolling, molten center of it all, the only thing you have to do is dig–"

A snippet of an image bursts into his mind:

…a plain, painted white door with a brass handle, otherwise unremarkable and entirely unassuming. And yet–

Careful, whispers the frigid air around him, inside of him.

"…that's – that's just my memory changing to fit what I know now," he says aloud, taking the warning to heart. He *should* know better than to keep probing. Hasn't he dug enough graves by now?

"They're still here – so it – it didn't happen–"

"–spent so long trying to get that door open, but nothing worked. When I finally stopped trying it was the final abandoning of my hope – trapped in this place for the rest of my life, assuming I even still aged–"

"There was a door," Martin echoes, unrelenting. "There was a door, and you went through it–"

“What else is new?” Jon mutters. It would be just like him: barging through doors, heedless of what waits on the other side, all because of that insufferable need to *know.*

“You went through the rift there. It brought you back. You *came back,*” Martin says, misty-eyed but nonetheless broadcasting defiance with his hands planted on his thighs, his elbows angling outward as he leans forward to put himself on Jon’s eye level. *“Please,* Jon, you have to remember.”

“I… I don’t remember going through that door,” Jon says – but as his mouth shapes the statement, he finds it riddled with cracks. They radiate and fork like lightning with every syllable he speaks, and as that fragile shell continues to disintegrate under closer scrutiny, he can see the contours of a different story hidden underneath.

…the staircase pitches down, down, down, stretching far deeper than it should…

“…and then I – I remember feeling a surge of terror as I heard the door close behind me with a click–”

…crowded out by a much deeper, more primal fear when he sees the fissure in the ground ahead…

“–I think I had a nightmare, but I don’t remember the details. I felt as though there was something I was missing, just beyond my grasp–”

…and yet there it is, boldly existing where it has no right or reason to be: a gnawing, open, inflamed wound in the fabric of reality, pulling him toward it like a black hole…

“–I remember standing there, looking down it with this… feeling of dread–”

…he hears a faint rustling, the whispers of tiny avalanches of dirt scraped loose and sent sliding down the walls of the crevice…

"–there was something else there, something I knew but could not remember. Every time I felt I was close, I was overcome with dizziness and nausea that threatened to topple me over–"

...he knows exactly what to expect, and still he isn't prepared when the first of the spider's legs peeks up and over the lip of the fissure–

He flinches back violently, sheer panic coursing through him like a lightning strike. Frantically, he clutches at his chest, knuckles blanching as he seizes a handful of fabric at his neckline.

"Jon?" Martin reaches out, but stops short of touching. "Are you okay?"

No. No, he isn't. Jon can barely even fill his lungs right now, overwhelmed as he is by the sudden, acute conviction that his own heart is trying to choke him, lodging somewhere in his larynx and drumming mercilessly against its walls. He stares wide-eyed at the ground, but he can still feel Martin's eyes on him, scalpel-like on his skin.

"I – I – I feel like I remember it clearly but sometimes things are so weird that you start to doubt yourself–"

"–I can no longer clearly distinguish between what is memory and what is nightmare. For many years, I thought that it might have been some strange or distorted memory–"

"They're all real memories," Martin says. "I – I think so, at least. I mean, I don't know exactly what you're seeing right now, and I wouldn't be able to verify any of the specifics anyway. But that general sequence of events – going to the Panopticon, then to Hill Top Road, and through the rift? That all happened."

There is a meaningful pause in which Martin clearly expects some sort of acknowledgment. Jon has nothing to offer. He wishes he did. Real or not, the disappointment on Martin's face is enough to turn Jon's stomach – and there's nowhere in this blinding, empty space for him to hide himself away.

“You’ve just… forgotten anything that happened after the point where you left the Lonely last time,” Martin persists, “because – well, that’s the Lonely’s MO, isn’t it? But you didn’t choose to stay here before, and you didn’t choose to be here now.”

Jon squeezes his eyes shut. Having only two, and with the ashes of a dead world dampening the noise, he doesn’t notice that Martin has moved until his hands are already cupping Jon’s face.

It comes as no surprise that he had forgotten what warmth felt like. What he did not realize until now is that he had forgotten what *cold* felt like. It was a painful process, acclimating to the Lonely, but once he let the chill seep into his bones, the pins and needles were quick to fade. With no fluctuation in temperature and nothing to provide a contrast, it was easy to just… forget.

Being so suddenly reintroduced to that sensation is jarring; the warmth *searing* after so long spent wanting. Jon can just barely pull in enough air to breathe out a fearful, disbelieving whisper: “Martin…?”

“Right here,” Martin says, just as quiet, just as guarded. Then Jon feels thumbs begin to stroke his cheekbones, slow and steady and soothing, and his eyes flutter open at the movement.

Gently, Martin moves one hand, placing it under Jon’s chin and guiding him to look up. Before – even just minutes ago – Jon might have fought it. Now, as if under a spell, he allows Martin to tilt his head back, to coax him toward eye contact.

There’s a glimmer of what looks like hope in Martin’s eyes, but it’s tempered by the tense set of his jaw, as if he doesn’t quite dare to voice that hope. For a drawn moment they hold that position, Jon’s thunderstruck stare locked with Martin’s expectant gaze, until the tension chips away the last of Jon’s reticence.

“You’re *warm,*” he rasps.

Martin blinks at him once, twice, a bemused expression on his face – and then he's blinking back tears, even as a chuckle ekes out of him.

"Jon," he says in a wobbly voice, an equally-wobbly smile pulling at the corners of his mouth, "my hands are *freezing.*"

Right now, Jon can't remember ever having felt anything so warm and *alive.* So… *real.*

And so *wrong*.

The Lonely excels at snaring cherry-picked wisps of memories, at muddying context and flattening the nuances of relationships until all that remains is the worst of oneself and others. Every wound, every humiliation, every rejection, every instance of alienation and insecurity is thrown into stark relief. Meanwhile, anything that might make the hurt worthwhile or even just *tolerable* – any genuine connection, any comfort, any transient moment of belonging or emotional fulfillment – fades into the background. The ghosts left behind to fill in the gaps are expertly designed to seed doubt and erode away at a victim until they too become little more than vague recollections – and then, eventually, blessedly, vanish from living memory altogether.

Simulating *substance,* though – let alone generating true *warmth,* capturing the reality of human touch – seems beyond the Lonely's capabilities, if only because such a thing is beyond the scope of its understanding.

So *how,* then? How can this feel so real?

"Are you with me now? Are you – can you…" Martin takes a shaky breath. "Do you remember?"

Between all the fear and pain, apparently Jon still has room for muscle memory not rooted in trauma. Trembling, still teetering on the edge of doubt, Jon lurches forward. Martin is there to catch him, gathering Jon into his lap and cocooning him in that impossible warmth. Without a second thought, Jon returns the embrace, his arms snaking under Martin's and his fingers

scrabbling against Martin's back for purchase before coming to rest just under his shoulder blades, clutching two tight fistfuls of fabric.

It's… overwhelming. Jon just barely keeps from whimpering as he shoves his face into Martin's chest, two sets of memories vying ruthlessly for validation.

One is a present and future where nothing ever changes, an endless expanse of stale terror and slow decay. In the other, *everything* changes: a door of a different sort thrown open and stumbled through; a whirlwind of reconciliations and second chances; a new path where hell is a certain past and a possible future but *not* a torturous present.

It's disorientating, and earthshattering, and *impossible*–

But he can't get all of that out, so all he says instead is: "Too good to be true."

The noise Martin makes is something between a sniffle and a laugh. "No offense, Jon, but how is anything about our situation too good to be true?"

"Because it would be better than *this*. *Anything* would be better than this, and – if you're real, that means…" Jon shudders, clinging harder. It's impossible to press himself any closer to Martin's comforting bulk than he already is, but that won't stop him trying. "I can't do it all over again. I *can't.*"

"You won't," Martin says, one hand stroking soothingly across Jon's back. "We all know, now. We know what Jonah is planning. We have a plan to stop him. We're *going* to stop him. This time *he's* the one in the dark – *he's* the one caught in the web – and we're not going to let him win again."

"You don't know that. You *can't* know that."

"Neither can you. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try."

“Is it really worth the risk?”

“What?” Martin breaks the embrace to put his hands on Jon’s shoulders instead, forcing him upright. “Of course it is! We can’t just – let it happen!”

“No, we can’t. And that’s exactly my point.” Jon focuses very intently on the weave of the fabric beneath his fingers. “Maybe it’s… safer. If I stay.”

“I know it *feels* safe–”

“Not – not for me,” Jon clarifies. “I just mean… the Ritual can’t go forward without a conduit. If I take myself out of the equation–”

“You think Jonah will just give up?” Martin says heatedly. “He’ll find a replacement, you said it yourself.”

“Not anytime soon.”

“We don’t know that. He could have other candidates lined up. I mean, what about Basira? Jonah’s always calling her ‘Detective’, and the *way* he says, it’s like… like how he says ‘Archivist’. Like it’s some sort of – proper Beholding title he assigned her. Rubbing it in that she’s stuck serving the Eye just the same as the rest of us, that she’s feeding it in her own way whether she likes it or not. He held her hostage to force Daisy into working for him – what’s to say he won’t find a way to do the same in reverse?”

Jon scoffs. “Basira knows better than to–”

“It’s not about *knowing,* Jon! It’s about what’s at stake, and what makes you vulnerable, and…” Martin huffs. Jon catches a brief flash of a grin, thin-lipped and humorless, as if Martin is reacting to a private, morbid joke. “What’s important to you, and what you’re

willing to sacrifice to protect it. There's not a single person on earth who's immune to being manipulated. It doesn't matter how smart or competent or well-adjusted or *good* you are – *everyone* has a tipping point, if the right person corners them in the right place at the right time and pushes all the right buttons.

"If Jonah made Basira choose between losing Daisy and becoming the Archivist, and she chose the latter, it wouldn't make her foolish, or – or – or *evil.* I wouldn't judge, because I know what I'd choose if it were you and me in that scenario. And I'm sure she'd do everything in her power to avoid being what Jonah wants in an Archivist, but – she'd still be trapped in the same position that you are now, and I don't think she would miraculously fare any better. He'd torture her to mold her into shape, and if it didn't pan out, he'd throw her aside and move on to the next candidate."

"That's–"

"Or, what if he writes you off as a lost cause, doesn't see any of us as a decent replacement, and decides to start from scratch? He wouldn't want any loose strings. He killed Gertrude and Leitner because they knew too much and got in his way; I doubt he'd think twice about giving the rest of us the same treatment."

"I–"

"What if, what if, *what if*. We can both trot out as many hypotheticals we'd like, but it doesn't change anything. We can't predict the future, so we just have to take a leap of faith. You and me." Martin exhales with a sense of finality. His smile, while no doubt intended to be reassuring, twitches at the corners, betraying his nerves. "It worked before, right?"

"This is bigger than you and me." Martin flinches as though struck. Jon hates himself for it. "I – I'm *sorry,* but it is. I mean, look around."

Jon raises his head just enough to steal another glimpse of the Panopticon, still looming inexorably in the distance. A mistake, he realizes belatedly: the sight of it is like a gravity well, and it takes forceful effort to tear himself away once it has him riveted.

Martin doesn't follow Jon's line of sight. He only stares down at his lap, unconsciously clutching his hands to his chest, fingers tangling together just under his chin. Jon lets his own

hands migrate to Martin's shoulders. Martin keeps his head ducked, but his eyes do flick up to meet Jon's through the curtain of his hair.

"This happened once," Jon murmurs. "I can't let it happen again."

"It won't," Martin insists, rallying. *"We* won't let it. But you staying here won't help anything. Jonah will find another way. He'll keep trying until he gets it right, whether he has you or not. He'll recruit as many Archivists as it takes, hurt them like he hurt you, sacrifice as many people as he needs to get all fourteen marks in. *He's* the common denominator, *he's* the one who has to be eliminated. Not you."

As Martin speaks, Jon lets his hands slide down from Martin's shoulders. Before he can pull them back into his own lap, though, Martin seizes them and holds them tight.

"We'll find a way to stop him," he continues. "And whatever happens, however it plays out… one way or another, we'll do it together. That makes it worth it."

"It's not about *together,* it's about what *I* did, and you can't understand that. You… you can't know what it was like, the – the – the *violation* of it all, I can't describe – I'd never *felt* such–" Jon sucks in a sharp, shallow hiccup of a breath. "And – and then, what came after…"

The memory is possibly the most visceral in Jon's extensive collection of scars, which is a high bar to meet. Whatever inhuman durability the Eye grants him, a physical body wasn't built to contain that much violence; a single psyche was never meant to channel the brutal restructuring of an entire world in the blink of an eye.

He could *feel* the seams of reality rip open as if he himself was being torn apart; could feel the sky crack open as if his own bones were being snapped into pieces; could feel the shockwaves reverberating in the roots of his teeth. The door bursting into splinters in his mind, the shrapnel from the blast mincing his capacity for conscious thought, the flood of Seeing swamping every shred of selfhood – it wasn't so much a physical pain as it was a sensation of pure force and pressure, too massive and too concentrated for one mind to process.

“Regardless of whose *fault* it was, I was the one who pulled the trigger. Or,” Jon says, seeing Martin about to dissent, “maybe I *was* the trigger, or the gun, or – or the bullet. Whatever the case, it was – it was *my* voice shaping those words, *my* eyes reading that statement, *my* skin being worn like a – like a *glove* by the Eye, by the Archive, by – by *him,* and–”

Jon cuts himself short with a gasp, his uncooperative lungs spasming painfully when he attempts a deeper breath.

“Maybe – maybe I’m not the only one with that potential. Jonah could choose a new candidate, build another Archive. That doesn’t change the fact that I am presently the biggest risk to the world as we know it.” Jon looks Martin directly in the eye, trying to convey the true reality of the situation, begging him to understand. “All it would take is one incantation, Martin. Ninety-four words standing between the entire world and what waits behind that door. I’ve been the monster in everyone else’s story for so long, and I… I’m so *tired.*”

“I know,” Martin says, “and I’m sorry, but that doesn’t make it okay to chase the worst outcome.”

“The worst outcome?” Jon says incredulously. “Are you even listening? I’ve seen the worst outcome. I’ve *lived* it. Staying here isn’t it.”

“It is for me,” Martin retorts, a splotchy red creeping up his neck and onto his face. “You know, I… I can’t imagine making any choice that would mean losing you. It hurts to know that you could.”

“I wish I didn’t have to,” Jon murmurs.

“Well, good news: you don’t! We have options, and… *god*, I wish you wouldn’t always immediately choose the one that hurts you the most.”

“I…” Jon’s throat clicks when he swallows. “I’m just… trying to do the right thing.”

Martin watches him silently. Jon can't bring himself to look Martin in the eye, too afraid to confront what he might find there. Instead, shamefaced, he allows his gaze to drift: first to the red blotches staining Martin's cheeks, then to the tired lines of his face, then back to that angry, mottled flush, this time noting how it obscures the freckles that Jon loves so dearly. Every observation Jon makes only compounds his guilt.

Then Martin shrugs.

"Okay," he says. "Fine."

That was… easy. *Suspiciously* easy. The thought crosses Jon's mind that perhaps the Lonely managed to deceive him and this isn't Martin after all. But no, he thinks a moment later, Martin has always been able to match his stubbornness pound-for-pound and tit-for-tat. Play-acting at passive-aggression is very much within his wheelhouse.

What Jon doesn't anticipate is Martin gathering him back up into a bear hug. Jon exhales with a surprised little *oof* as he's pulled tight to Martin's chest.

"Martin…?"

"Hm?"

"What, ah… what are you doing?"

"Oh, you know. Sharing body heat."

As pleasant as the pressure is, and as much as Jon wants to shut his brain off and sink into the embrace, he's always been the type to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"What–?"

“I’m not leaving without you, so I suppose we’ll both just have to get used to being cold and bored and pointlessly sad. We may as well get a head start on trying to keep warm.”

“What?” Jon starts wriggling, trying to worm his way out of Martin’s grip just enough to get a good look at his face. Despite the concerted effort, he only succeeds in getting a faceful of wool as Martin tugs him close again, resting his chin on the crown of Jon’s head for good measure. “Martin!”

“Jon,” Martin replies, infuriatingly nonchalant.

“This is – this is serious!”

“Yep,” Martin says, enunciating the end of the word with a pop. “Now shush, I’m trying to dredge up a change in scenery. Holidays are always lonely. I *know* I’ve got to have at least one memory of staring wistfully out a window at a winter wonderland knocking around in my brain somewhere…”

“You want to make it *colder?”*

“I saw a survivalist documentary once about emergency shelters. No offense to your subconscious, but apocalypse dust doesn’t make for a good bivouac. *Snow,* on the other hand–”

“You’re being *ridiculous,*” Jon huffs, planting both of his palms on Martin’s chest and trying to shove off.

“So are you. Ball’s in your court, Jon. You figure out what you want to do, but wherever you go, I go.”

“That is *not* fair–”

“Tough.”

“No.” Jon redoubles his efforts to squirm away, ducking his head to dislodge Martin’s chin. “You can’t–”

Martin loosens his grip somewhat, letting Jon draw back enough for them to stare daggers at one another. Jon’s intimidation factor is significantly undercut by the fact that his hair, now thoroughly tousled and frizzy with static, is hanging in front of his face. To make matters worse, when he tosses his head and tries to sweep it out of the way, he belatedly realizes that a bit of it has gotten into his mouth, and his scripted protest dissolves into spluttering.

Martin, damn him, watches with a smirk that is just as endearing as it is endeared. Jon wishes he could muster up some outrage, but he’s long since passed the point where he felt the need to save face around Martin. Now, Martin’s smug affection is just charming rather grating.

“Martin,” Jon says, trying and failing to revive his aloof, stuffy academic persona. Summoning that tone of voice is one thing. Subjecting Martin’s *name* to it is something else entirely. It used to be so thoughtlessly easy. Now, he can only muster up that offhand disdain in jest.

That’s not a bad thing – Martin never deserved that sort of contempt. But Jon *is* trying to voice some sincere disagreement, here, and it’s difficult to do that when Martin is looking at him like… like he’s gone and made a fool of himself, and Martin has opted to find it adorable rather than cringe-worthy.

“Martin,” Jon tries again. Apparently, if he’s not striving for any particular tone, his voice automatically defaults to something that can best be described as *terminally exhausted*. The hint of amusement in Martin’s eyes dissipates immediately at the drastic shift. “You don’t belong here.”

“Neither do you.”

“You don’t *get it–”*

“No, I do,” Martin says. “You explained yourself perfectly. You feel like you need to sacrifice yourself to keep the world safe.”

“It’s not about *feeling,* it’s about the reality of the situation.”

“Okay, well, you’re an important part of my world, and I want to keep you safe. I think it’s only fair that I get to indulge in a bit of self-sacrifice, too. I mean, if it’s okay to sacrifice one person for the sake of the world, what’s one more?”

“Martin,” Jon says, as sternly as he can.

“Jon,” Martin returns, parroting Jon’s tone, but with an undertone of amiable mockery.

If they were bickering over something trivial, Jon might reciprocate. Right now, he can’t find any humor in their situation. Martin must realize that, because his expression falls and he sighs.

“Look,” he says, just as uncompromising, but now thoroughly somber. “I can’t imagine what it was like, being used like that, being forced to watch, surviving it alone for so long. No one deserves that, and – if you feel like trapping yourself here is the only way to keep yourself safe, then I… I don’t blame you if you want to stay.”

“You think I’m running away,” Jon realizes suddenly.

“Maybe not consciously. And ‘running away’ has the wrong connotations. I just mean that stopping Jonah shouldn’t fall on your shoulders. I know you’re tired, and if you want to tap out, then… I *get* it, I really do.” Martin offers him a wry smile, offset by the wistful look in his eyes. “It would probably be the first time I’ve ever seen you show any hint of a self-preservation instinct, honestly.”

“I’m not – I’m not trying to–”

“I *know* your brain is twisting my words right now, so let me be clear. I’m *not* accusing you of being selfish. Quite the opposite, really. It’s *okay* if you want to keep yourself safe. Just… don’t pretend that staying here would save the whole world.”

“It would make it safer, at least. For – for a time. And you’ve said yourself that every moment counts for something.”

“Yeah. That includes *your* moments. And if you want to spend them here, that’s your choice. Just like it’s my choice if I want to spend mine here with you.”

“He has a point.”

The two of them spring apart at the unexpected interruption – *like two teenagers caught snogging at a funeral,* supplies the unhelpful part of Jon’s brain that habitually compensates for fear with snark. Jon topples sideways out of Martin’s lap, Martin subsequently scrambles to his feet, and Peter looks on with a self-satisfied smirk.

“You know,” Martin says, brushing himself off as he levels Peter with a vicious glare, “for someone who hates hearing other people talk, you do a *lot* of eavesdropping.”

Jon’s heart plummets into his stomach. *Eavesdropping.*

“In my defense,” Peter says, “you weren’t making it difficult.”

“How much–” Jon groans as he struggles to stand, flinging one hand out for purchase. Without missing a beat, Martin lends a hand. The instant Jon is upright and blood rushes back into his cramped limbs, his knees nearly buckle beneath him. Martin loops an arm around Jon's waist and tugs him close, practically supporting his entire – admittedly negligible – weight. “H-how – how much did you hear?”

“Oh, enough to gather that Elias *really* doesn’t know what he’s dealing with.” Peter grins. “Does he?”

Jon’s blood runs cold in a way that has nothing to do with the Lonely – and now that Martin has thawed him out, he can actually feel the chill washing over him.

“Never mind that,” Martin says. “What are you doing here? You agreed not to interfere–”

“Until your time was up,” Peter says amiably. “And you’ve just hit the seventy-two hour mark.”

All the color drains from Martin’s face.

“That’s not possible,” he says, his voice shaking just slightly as uncertainty wedges itself into the widening crack in his bravado. “It’s barely been half an hour since you last spoke to me. If I was already so close to losing, you wouldn’t have bothered trying to make another deal.”

“Deal?” Jon’s heart rate ticks up another notch. “What deal?”

“Time works differently here than it does in the outside world,” Peter says.

“If anything, you owe me an extension,” Martin says, lifting his chin as he recovers from his momentary shock. “You broke the rules with your little interruption earlier – and if time is as weird as you say, how am I supposed to know how long that *really* took?”

“We had an *agreement.*”

“Martin?” Jon tries again, louder this time. He can barely hear himself speak over the blood rushing in his ears. “What is he talking about?”

Martin and Peter continue to argue over his head.

"Yeah, but you can't expect me to believe you're telling the truth. Let me finish what I came here to do – see if I can bring Jon home, *without* any more interruptions from you – and then I can confirm for myself how much time has passed in the real world. If – *if* – it really has been three days, I'll uphold my end of the deal. But until then, you're not getting my cooperation."

"Enough!" Peter snarls. "You're embarrassing us both, making this more complicated than it has to be–"

"What *deal?"* Jon bursts out, shouting to compete with the thunder of his own heart.

Peter looks down at him as if seeing him for the first time. Normally, Jon might scoff at the malevolent leer on Peter's face; summon some bluster of his own and return that cold contempt tenfold. But Martin has only just taken a chisel to his defenses, wrenched him up and out from the depths that had been keeping him static and numb and untouchable. He's too raw, too exposed, too brittle to mask the bedrock of fear underneath it all.

"Martin here took a *very* foolish risk, and the gamble didn't pay off. I did warn him that his faith in you was misplaced, but… no use trying to talk sense into a hopeless romantic."

"What does that mean?" Jon tugs on Martin's sleeve. "Martin, what does that mean?"

"I had three days to find you and bring you home," Martin says, still not taking his eyes off of Peter. "We leave the Lonely together by then, or not at all."

"What? Why?" Jon yanks on Martin's arm again. "Why would you *do* that?"

“You know why.” Martin finally looks at him, eyes blazing. “For the same reason you’d do the same for me–”

The next thing Jon knows, he’s being shoved away – forcefully enough that it would knock him off his feet on a good day, let alone right now, with his legs too weak to hold him up. He’s listing forward before he has a chance to consciously process why.

Even though the fall is a short one, even though it takes barely more than a second for him to go from (what can be charitably called) standing to landing on hands and knees in the dust, there’s still a frozen moment where he finds himself back in time, trapped in indefinite freefall and beholden to the mercy of Mike Crew, unable to breathe or scream or *beg*–

Then he hears himself make a noise – some humiliating blend of an indignant squawk and an alarmed yelp – and the flashback ends, landing him back in the present moment as soon as he hits the ground.

Bewildered – and a little affronted, feeling rather like a sleeping cat shunted out of a warm lap – he looks up to demand an explanation. What he sees nearly plunges him into yet another memory.

Except this one is real. This is happening now. This is happening *again.*

There’s a knife. Martin’s head is wrenched back to expose his neck, and there’s a knife at his throat, and looming over his shoulder is a familiar face: haggard and harried-looking, with a menacing glower that would be fearsome on its own, but made all the more threatening by a pair of wild, terrified eyes.

It’s obvious in the lines of his face, the faint tremble in his hand, the sweat on his brow: Trevor is desperate, and desperate people act in unpredictable ways.

“Not a *word*,” he commands, and then, in a low growl against Martin’s ear: “And *you*. You so much as *flinch* and you’re dead. You might be bigger, but I’m faster, and I’m the one with the knife. Try to overpower me, and I promise you won’t live long enough to regret it.”

Jon gets as far as parting his lips before Trevor angles the blade, the harsh white light of the Lonely glinting off the metal. Jon's every instinct screams at him to move, to pull Martin to safety – to *stand up*, debility be damned, or do anything at all to diffuse the situation. He wants to snuff out anything and everything cruel enough, *brazen* enough to trigger the abject terror he sees in Martin's eyes, starting right here and now. He wants to excise that fear and force it down Trevor's throat instead. Make *him* feel it.

He could do it, too. He *could*–

"What did I just say?" Trevor taps the knife against Martin's throat – delicately, but deliberately, a measured *one, two, three* punctuated by a demonstrative slicing motion. Martin squeezes his eyes shut as the sharp edge skates across his skin, just shy of carving into him. Jon's jaw snaps shut so quickly his teeth collide with an audible clack. "Don't test me, Sims. I'm a quicker draw. You won't be able to order me fast enough to stop him bleeding out. And you" – Trevor twists his hand in Martin's hair and jerks his head back further – *"stop squirming.* Last warning."

A choked gasp escapes Martin's mouth, but he does go still. As still as possible, at least – Jon can see the rapid rise and fall of his chest, the way the knife-edge creases the skin beneath it with each shallow breath, the way his eyes keep darting to the left, trying to catch a glimpse of the Hunter in the corner of his eye without moving his head.

Jon wishes more than anything that he could offer some sort of reassurance – and do a better job at it than he did the last time this happened – but he doesn't dare speak. What would he even say? During the apocalypse, Jon could offer some protection, but now? Much as he hated his post-apocalyptic station, Jon would do anything in this moment to have that power back.

Then again, all of that power ultimately amounted to nothing, didn't it? They escaped this – and many domains that came after – but Jon couldn't save anyone in the end. Martin was no exception.

Satisfied that the threat has served its purpose, Trevor shifts his attention. Jon's eyes are still glued on the knife; on Trevor's white-knuckled grip on the handle; on the dangerous indent

the blade leaves on Martin's throat, its depth fluctuating by micrometers with every minute spasm of Trevor's hand, with every truncated breath Martin dares to gulp down.

"Heard you talking," Trevor says. Jon nearly stammers out a denial before he remembers *why* he hasn't said anything – and that Trevor still hasn't lifted the ban. As an added precaution, Jon plasters his tongue against the roof of his mouth and clenches his teeth. "You need this one for something, don't you?"

Puzzled, Jon follows Trevor's eyes, and–

Right. *Peter.* He's still here, and useless as ever – simply standing there with his arms crossed loosely in front of him, watching the proceedings with some mixture of distant fascination and mild annoyance.

"Bring her back," Trevor says, applying pressure to the knife for emphasis. *"Now."*

Jon tenses. How *little* that blade would have to sink in to draw blood, to sever something vital–

"Who?" Peter taps a finger against his lips in mock consideration. "Oh, right. Your… pack. Had trouble following her, did you? That's alright. It was bound to happen eventually. Your endurance isn't what it used to be."

Trevor's hand twitches. "Where is she?"

"Nowhere, now. You'll never find her."

"Bring. Her. *Back*."

"She's long gone."

The tiniest amount of blood wells up where the knife bites into Martin's throat. Martin's breath hitches. Jon could kill Peter a second time just for that, if only he could say a word.

"Tell me where she is," Trevor says, low and dangerous, "or he's *dead*."

Peter bares his teeth in a smile. "No."

"Tell me!" Trevor bellows, and then he's heaving Martin aside to charge at Peter.

Martin pitches forward and onto his knees before he can steady himself. Immediately Jon is at his side, stuttering out a feverish mantra of *are-you-okay-are-you-okay-are-you-okay.* His hands flutter uselessly for several seconds before they settle over Martin's ears, tipping his head back so Jon can examine his neck. It's bleeding freely now, the knife having cut deeper with Trevor's careless handling. Jon whimpers in sympathy.

"I'm fine." The pronounced quaver in Martin's voice is not reassuring. "It's not that deep."

It's not, but that does little to settle Jon's nerves as he gathers the cuff of his sleeve in one shaky hand and brings it to Martin's neck, applying gentle pressure to staunch the flow.

He's scarcely aware of what's going on in his periphery until he hears Peter say, *"That* was a mistake."

Jon glances up just in time to see Trevor primed to strike – leaning into Peter's space until their faces are scant centimeters apart, one hand fastened to Peter's lapel, the other still gripping the knife, this time holding it flush to Peter's throat. The gleam of the metal seems dull in comparison to the steely glint in Peter's pale eyes.

Then Peter's lips twist in revulsion, the temperature plummets, and Jon knows what's about to happen just before Peter opens his mouth.

“Go. Away.”

There is a gravity to the command, as if reality itself is being rewritten: one thread excised from the tapestry with surgical precision, a new one spoken into being and deftly sewn in to replace the old.

In the breadth between the two words, an avalanche of fog billows in. It lingers for only a fraction of a moment, dispersing the instant the last syllable leaves Peter’s lips. In its wake, Trevor is gone as if he’d never been there at all. The void left behind should feel incongruous, but instead it just feels… right. An empty space more tangible than any person could ever hope to be.

Peter straightens his clothes, rolls his shoulders, and turns his cold eyes on Martin.

“Now then,” he says crisply, “enough stalling. You lost. It’s time for you to make good on your word.”

Martin laughs. “You *really* think I care about–”

“And *you,*” Peter sneers, fixing his gaze on Jon, “will stay here.”

A stab of icy panic shoots through Jon’s heart. Immediately he shrinks back and hunkers low. Just as immediately, a protective arm enfolds him, a comforting weight settling heavy on his shoulders as Martin gathers him close.

“Not to worry, Martin,” Peter says languidly. “He’ll get used to it here. If anything, it’s far kinder than the bloody end he would meet at the hands of some of the other–”

Peter’s sentence terminates in a confused, punched-out noise. It might have been the sort of cry that starts out as autonomic, born in the fleeting, flailing moment before the conscious

mind becomes aware of the source of the alarm. It never progresses beyond that nascent stage. Almost instantaneously the sound is throttled, swallowed up by a winded exhalation.

It happens in a blur: a bright silver flash, a swift horizontal slice from left to right, and then a gush of crimson. Peter's lips move wordlessly, nothing but a horrible gurgling noise and a spatter of red spittle spilling out. His throat bobs with the effort – to swallow, to breathe, to speak, Jon doesn't know – and splits the seam wider.

Well then, Jon thinks as he eyes the rapidly-expanding borders of the vibrant stain creeping down Peter's shirtfront. *I… suppose that saves me the trouble.*

Peter staggers forward a step, then collapses to the ground, finally revealing his assailant.

Julia Montauk stares down at her prey with eyes perhaps more wintry than Peter's, watching impassively as he gags and writhes, fumbling to stem the flood, his feeble fingers slipping uselessly on blood-slick skin. It takes little more than a minute for the weak death throes to subside, and only when the last rattling wheeze of a breath passes through his lips does Julia blink.

She doesn't even take the time to revel in the kill, wiping the blade off on her trousers without fanfare. "Where's Trevor?"

"You might have asked him," Martin says, a nervous laugh bubbling out of him as he takes in the grisly aftermath.

"Bastard wasn't going to tell me anything." There's still blood smeared on Julia's hands, staining her sleeve, splattered across her ashen face. She pays it no mind.

"No," Jon agrees quietly. "He wouldn't have."

"You will, though." The hand holding the knife is trembling, but Julia's stare is unwavering.

“I… I can’t.”

“You can,” Julia says, matter-of-fact. “You will.”

“I’m not… I’m not a Hunter, Julia. I can’t track him any better than you can.”

“You can See things, can’t you?” Julia advances on him. Although she still carries herself with lethal purpose, Jon can see the way the Lonely has drained her – in the lines of her face, her hollow tone of voice, her haunted eyes. “Well, See which way he went.”

“It’s not… there’s no direction here, no – no *distance,* not in the conventional sense. Travel doesn’t work like it does in the real world. The journey is the journey, and the destination – whatever it is, and whether you reach it – is dependent on your state of mind.”

“I don’t want your cryptic *bullshit*,” Julia grits out. “I want a straight answer.”

“R-right, ah–” Jon clears his throat. “What I mean is, there’s no one way out of here – or… there *is,* but – it’s not a physical location, per se, it’s–”

“Wait,” Martin says. With mild alarm, Jon looks to him with a question on the tip of his tongue. That question goes unasked: Jon has seen this particular shrewd look often enough to recognize that Martin knows *exactly* where he’s going with this. “If you want advice, you have to give us something in return.”

Julia barks a laugh, but there’s no true humor in it. “If anything, he owes *us* for stealing.”

“Gerry wasn’t yours to keep,” Jon says.

“Gerry?” Julia chuckles derisively. “You that soft on him?”

Jon is too tired to mince words. “I burned his page.”

Martin gives Jon a chiding look, but he doesn’t get a chance to follow through on the reprimand before Julia takes over.

“You did what?” she says, deadly calm.

“He… he asked me to.” Julia’s nostrils flare and her fist tightens around the knife, but Jon doesn’t back down. “He was a *person,* Julia, and he was hurting. The world was cruel to him while he was alive, and what happened after was even more so. He was owed some – some basic *decency* for once. All he asked for was to be allowed to rest.”

“So that’s that,” Martin interjects before Julia can reply. “Jon doesn’t have what you’re after, and he’s not a monster, so the only other reason to keep hunting him would be petty revenge. If you want help, you have to promise to leave him be after this.” A pause. “And – and Daisy, too.”

“Everyone at the Institute,” Jon adds. “It’s not full of monsters like you think. Most employees don’t even know the Fears exist. They’re just… normal people working a nine-to-five, and they don’t bring the ghost stories home with them when they clock out at the end of the day.”

“Well,” Martin says thoughtfully, “there is *one* monster on payroll.”

“Martin,” Jon admonishes, but Martin pays him no mind.

“Elias Bouchard,” he says. “The head of the Institute, that is.”

Julia snorts. “You want your boss dead, do it yourself. I’m not an assassin for hire.”

“Yeah, but you hunt monsters, right?” Martin says. “Well, Elias has been killing people to prolong his own life and he has no plans of stopping.”

It barely scrapes the surface of the truth, but Jon remains silent. Where he has a tendency to overdo it – to inventory every piece of supporting evidence, to exhaust every possible avenue of debate, to lay out every justification to hammer his point home – Martin has an appreciation for parsimony and precision. In this instance, he seems keen on keeping things simple, doling out only as much information as he deems necessary to lead Julia where he wants her to go.

To plant the seed of an idea and let *her* nurture it to its natural conclusion.

“Getting at him might be a challenge” – Julia’s eyes seem to light up at that – “seeing as he’s in prison right now for the last two murders he committed, but he keeps implying that it’s only temporary. I’m sure he’ll find a way to blackmail or bribe his way out eventually.” Martin shrugs. “Anyway, he’s fair game if you can manage to get your hands on him, but you have to leave the rest of us alone.”

Julia lapses into a pensive silence. Her mouth remains shut, but Jon can see the outline of her tongue beneath her upper lip, running over her front teeth as if she’s tasting the idea. Savoring it.

Finally, she lifts her head. Her eyes find Jon’s. Her pupils shrink as they hone in on him, and for a moment it feels as if he himself is being constricted, the full weight of her attention coiling around him like a python and squeezing the air out of his lungs.

“So?” Martin says, and Julia’s eyes swivel to him. Martin meets them – just as intently, just as searchingly. “Will you call off the hunt?”

Slowly, her eyes slide away from him and back to Jon. She holds him there, trapped in a predator’s tractor beam, for an agonizing moment. And then–

“Fine,” she says.

“You–” Martin raises his eyebrows. “Wait, really?”

“I need to find Trevor.”

“How do we know you’ll keep your word?”

“You don’t. But your Archivist’s getting to be more trouble than he’s worth. Monsters are a dime a dozen. No sense in getting us killed over a single one.”

“He’s not a–”

“Isn’t that right?” Julia brandishes her knife, pointing the tip directly at Jon’s face. The distance minimizes the physical threat, but not the weight of the accompanying condemnation. “You aren’t *special*. Just another parasite pretending to be human. Your boyfriend is fooling himself, but you? You’re not fooling anyone. Not even yourself.”

Martin bristles. “He’s *not*–”

Julia keeps her eyes trained on Jon. “Now finish what you were saying earlier, *Archivist.*”

It was Martin who initiated the negotiations, so Jon looks to him for guidance. Martin is clearly still furious – and seriously weighing the benefits of spite against the risk of incurring Julia’s wrath, if Jon is any judge – but after a few seconds, he does offer a curt nod. Only when Jon receives the go-ahead does he begin to answer.

“I, ah – I can’t tell you which way to go, because the way through here isn’t a *place.* It’s more of a… a method. And it’s not exactly the same for everyone, because *loneliness* isn’t the same for everyone – which means the antidote isn’t the same for everyone.” Unthinkingly, Jon leans against Martin’s side. “Your reasons – for being here, for wanting to leave – aren’t *my* reasons, and vice versa.”

“Get to the point.”

“It’s about connections. Attachments. To have any hope of navigating the Lonely, you need a reason – something to anchor you, to… to remind you why it’s worth the effort. And in my experience, it’s vital that the link goes both ways.”

“Meaning?” Julia says through gritted teeth.

“Generally speaking, the Powers are evenly matched. It’s one thing for Avatars to, ah…” Jon’s gaze drifts to Peter’s crumpled body, sprawled where it fell. To the places where blood has soaked into the ground, forming crimson clots in the bone-white sediment. “To kill each other. But overpowering an entire *domain* is something else entirely. If I tried to – to brute force my way out of here using only the Eye, it would never work. It’s just… fear crashing up against fear. You need something else, something stronger than fear, to shift the balance.” Jon takes a shaky breath. “There’s nothing tying me to Trevor except for fear. My fear of him; my fear feeding him.”

Julia purses her lips. “So you can’t find him.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No you’re not,” Julia says, tossing her head back with a scornful laugh. “Some *help* you are. I’ll just have to find him myself.”

“That’s what I just *said*–” Jon stops himself as Julia shoots him a warning glare. “B-but what I *mean* is that being a Hunter won’t be enough. We’re more than just fear.” Jon bites his lip and then continues, softly: “Ours, or that of others.”

“Yeah,” Julia scoffs as she turns to leave. “Whatever you say.”

“Julia–”

“What?” she snarls, whipping back around to glower at him.

Jon struggles for words before settling on, “Good luck. I… hope you find him.”

“Sure you do,” Julia says scathingly.

With that, she stalks off without a backward glance. It takes only a few long strides before the fog swallows her up entirely.

Martin heaves a sigh that is equal parts relief and exhaustion.

“Do you think she’ll find him?” he asks after a moment.

“I don’t know,” Jon says. “Maybe.”

“Did we do the right thing there? There’s no guarantee she’ll keep her promise.”

“I don’t know.”

“Daisy had a change of heart. Maybe they will, too.” Something must show on Jon’s face, because Martin follows it up with, “You don’t think so.”

“It’s not impossible, I suppose. But even if they change their mind about hunting *me,* I… have a hard time imagining them giving up on hunting altogether. The Hunt is probably the only thing keeping Trevor alive at this point, and…” Jon sighs. “I don’t know. Sometimes people surprise you.”

“Hm. Either way, it’s… out of our hands, I suppose.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah,” Martin echoes. And then: “Why *did* you want to help, anyway?”

“It felt… unfair, to deny them a second chance. Daisy got one. I got one.” Jon shrugs halfheartedly. “For all the harm they’ve caused, I’ve done far worse.”

“Jon–”

Jon doesn’t even register the thought crossing his mind before he’s blurting it out: “And – they were children.”

Martin frowns. “What?”

“I…” Jon chews on his lip. “Julia was seven when she lost her mother to the Dark. Arguably lost her father that same night. Trevor… he grew up surrounded by the human sort of monster, but he was still only sixteen when he met the real thing. A teenager, and he watched a monster rip his brother’s throat out. Whatever happened after, whatever choices they made… they didn’t deserve their first monsters.”

“Neither did you,” Martin points out.

It all comes back to that, doesn’t it? What all of their lives might have looked like had they never crossed paths with capital-F Fear. All the branching routes they might potentially have followed, had so many hypothetical futures not been so brutally suffocated in the cradle *en masse*.

“More than once,” Jon says, “I was given a choice whether to die or… become something else. It doesn’t balance the scales – and maybe it’s not a kindness, given how cruel a choice it is – but… I still didn’t want to deprive them of options. They’ve been subjected to enough of that.”

“So have you,” Martin says quietly. “And it’s not wrong to act in self-defense.”

“No. But it’s not wrong to give people a second chance, either. Ill-advised, maybe, but… I can’t help thinking – monsters don’t show mercy, or – or pity. But *people* can.”

Martin watches him with an expression that is at first quizzical, then concerned, then exasperated – *at* Jon or on his behalf, Jon doesn’t know – before finally settling on a wistful sort of understanding.

“Yeah, well,” he says grudgingly. *“People* can also stand to find a balance between mercy and, you know, basic self-preservation.”

“Touché,” Jon says with an embarrassed laugh. “I, ah. I’m sure Basira will have some choice words when we tell her what happened.”

“Mm.” Martin is quiet for a minute. “So… when you say *we’ll* tell Basira what happened…”

Jon sighs. “I still think it’s… *unwise* for me to leave–”

“But not *wrong*.”

“Debatable,” Jon parries. He stares into Martin’s eyes, searching for… he doesn’t know – any hint of tractability, anything that might signal willingness to compromise. He finds none. “But it’s a moot point, isn’t it? You’re not going to budge.”

“Nope,” Martin says with a shrug. “Sorry. Or – actually, no. I’m not going to apologize for wanting to keep you safe. You wouldn’t, if it was me wanting to stay.”

“That… that’s *different*–”

“You’re doing the double standards thing again,” Martin sighs. “Whatever. We’ll work on it. Together. The only question is where. So… what will it be?” He offers his hand. “Are we staying, or are we going?”

Jon stares at Martin’s upturned palm. Affection blooms and then wilts under a searing catch-22. The guilt is unavoidable; he has only to choose to whom he will owe his – endless, inadequate – apologies. What does it say about him, that he’s agonizing over what species of shame he can better bear to live with, rather than the objective consequences of his choice?

He doesn’t *want* it to be his choice. He wants to abdicate responsibility; he wants to be shielded from accusations and blame; he wants plausible deniability; he wants to be selfish with none of the *guilt*–

But he would still be making a choice. An unscrupulous, underhanded one. Because he knows that Martin will always choose to save him. That Martin will feel *compelled* to save him. Jon can be honest with himself, own up to his selfishness, and save himself – *or* he can force Martin to do it for him. Either way, Jon will be putting an entire world at risk for his own sake. The question is whether he burdens Martin with the same guilty conscience.

Fleetingly, he wonders whether he is the trolley or the operator; then he decides that it doesn’t matter, because he frequently hates metaphors and he always hates ethical dilemmas and he *especially* hates ethical dilemmas couched in metaphor. He isn’t safe within the low-stakes confines of a thought experiment, and his frenzied indecision has consequences beyond sleepless nights or an exasperated debate partner.

Exhausted tears prickle in Jon’s eyes as he tries to find sense in a stream of consciousness more akin to whitewater rapids. He can barely catch a glimpse of each thought as it surges by.

“Jon?” Martin prompts. Jon clings to his voice like it’s a buoy. There’s hope in it, but of a fragile sort, quaking under the threat of being dashed. “Home?”

Home. Jon wants to go home. It’s self-centered, and undeserved, and indefensibly dangerous, but–

“Please,” Martin says – so quiet, nearly a whisper, as if it isn’t meant for Jon at all, but rather a prayer to whatever deity might be listening.

But there is no benevolent power listening. No one else to hear except Jon. And someone like Martin deserves to be heard.

Martin was right before. Jon *has* taken leaps of faith. It’s no surprise, he supposes, that the deciding factor is still now, as it has always been, Martin.

Martin is sincerely contemplating the pros and cons of just throwing Jon over his shoulder and hauling him bodily out of the Lonely when finally, *finally* Jon’s cold palm alights on his own. Martin struggles to swallow as he looks up to meet Jon’s eyes, terrified of what he’ll find there. Somewhere in his chest, a pendulum swings wildly between disbelief and relief.

Then Jon gives the tiniest of nods and relief wins out, so immeasurable that it could have bowled Martin over had he not already been on the ground.

“Home?” Martin says again, just to be sure. *Please say yes.*

Jon’s fingers curl around Martin’s hand. “Home.”

With that one word, relief turns to rapture. When Martin clasps their hands together more fully and pulls him forward, Jon doesn’t resist. Martin takes that as permission to draw him

into a full embrace. Jon follows his lead, climbing back into Martin's lap and throwing his arms around Martin's middle.

"Thank you," Martin whispers into his ear. Jon lets out a soft, juddering sigh, and although his breath against Martin's neck doesn't feel quite as warm as it should be, it's reassuring all the same. More reassuring is the way that Jon tightens his grip, locking his hands together against the ridge of Martin's spine.

They stay like that for some time – breathing, Martin notes, in perfect synchrony – until Jon starts to shiver, as if he's just now become aware of how cold it is.

"Come on, then." It comes out as little more than a croak, and Martin clears his throat before continuing. "Let's go home."

Obediently, Jon slides off of Martin's lap. His movements are jerky, and when Martin stands and reaches down to help him up, there's a short delay wherein Jon just stares blankly at Martin's hand. It takes a few seconds of Martin wiggling his fingers before Jon reaches back, and even then, Martin still has to meet him more than halfway.

Martin wonders how much of that is due to Jon's own continued reticence and how much is simply the Lonely trying to drag him back under now that it's so near to losing its grip. Regardless, Jon's about as light as he could be without literally losing a few ribs. It takes no effort at all to support him, ragdoll as he is.

Having his feet under him does appear to loosen the shackles somewhat. Jon seems to be making an active effort to stand on his own now, his face scrunching up in concentration as he glares down at his legs.

"Here, let me–"

"I'm fine." It isn't said irately or even dismissively. If anything, Jon's mouth is running on autopilot while he pours all of his focus into the insurmountable task of standing on his own two feet. The wrinkles on his forehead deepen, muscles in his jaw moving minutely as he clenches his teeth.

It's an expression Martin associates with Jon's trademark, occasionally belligerent insistence on self-sufficiency. Disorientation, it seems, doesn't curtail that innate stubbornness.

"Let me help," Martin says, more firmly this time.

Gone are the days when Jon would have bitten Martin's head off for such a thing. Granted, even back then, Jon's attitude wasn't much of a deterrent. Martin all but evicted him from the premises when he tried to sneak into the building while he was still on worm-induced medical leave. Even so, Martin expects at least some perfunctory grumbling. Instead, Jon just exhales heavily and lolls against Martin's side, so abruptly that Martin almost doesn't catch him.

"Oh! Okay. Do you, um… do you want me to carry you? Or – or I can put you on my back, if you think you can hold on?"

Jon opts for the latter suggestion. Judging by how decisively he drapes his arms over Martin's shoulders, wraps his legs around Martin's waist without a trace of self-consciousness, and readily allows Martin to support him with arms hooked beneath his thighs, this must not be a first for him. He settles quickly and breathes a contented sigh that rustles Martin's hair.

Once Martin's brain stops short-circuiting, he takes a few steps – and then promptly realizes that he has no idea where he's going.

"Um. Jon?"

Jon gives an inquisitive hum. An unfairly adorable one, at that, vague and groggy-sounding.

"Do you, uh… do you know which way is out?"

“Oh, it doesn’t really matter which direction you go,” Jon mumbles into Martin’s shoulder. “If you just keep moving, and not forgetting why, it’ll spit you out eventually. Hard to get free once it’s got you stuck in place, but it has to get a grip on you first. Like a… sundew.” A pause. “But frost-tolerant.” Another, slightly longer pause. “And… allergic to companionship.”

“That metaphor got away from you,” Martin teases. Jon accepts the charge with a sheepish chuckle. The sound of it ignites an affectionate thrill in Martin – a warm, pleasant buzz with which the Lonely’s chill could never hope to compete.

So, just like when he first landed in the Lonely, Martin simply… starts walking – only this time, he’s not on his own. It isn’t long before the dust beneath his feet ceases to be; not long after, the distant tower fades from view. Martin braces himself to wander headlong into yet another iteration of the Lonely – some projection of his own memories, or Jon’s, or even some horrible amalgamation of the two – but the empty white backdrop remains just that.

The fog is still thick, but its consistency has changed. Before, it was an endlessly-generating blanket of mist, opaque to the eye and yet uncannily insubstantial – as if it existed on a plane slightly removed from everything else, leaching its cold into the skin without ever closing that last atom’s breadth of distance that would lend it true presence. Now, it’s more like smoke: capable of being interacted with and responsive to Martin’s movements, parting and wafting easily out of his way as he continues onward.

Then, in a terrifying instant, the fog condenses. It obscures Martin’s vision entirely, leaving him unmoored in space with only Jon’s comforting – if slight – weight against his back to keep him grounded. He has a moment to feel as though the walls are closing in on them–

And then it all fades.

It’s a bit of a shock to the system, stumbling out of the Lonely. In an instant, the temperature goes from freezing to just uncomfortably chill, which still feels warm in comparison. The space in which they find themselves is still cramped, but poorly lit now. In the Lonely, everything had a soft-edged, mirage-like quality to it. Now, as Martin’s eyes adjust to the

murk, the world starts coming back into focus. He can even see the outlines of the brick comprising the walls surrounding them.

He has only a few seconds to revel in the solid reality of the ground beneath his feet.

“About time,” comes Daisy’s voice from behind him.

The sight that greets him when he turns around almost makes him wish for the blurry edges and washed-out colors of the Lonely all over again.

The area is illuminated only by the open trapdoor in the ceiling, but it’s sufficient enough for Martin to take in the scene in front of him. The floor, the walls, and even the ceiling are splattered with bits of gore and viscera. Chunks of muscle and gristle litter the ground, along with the mangled remains of what looks like the sloughed-off skin of degloved hands.

One of them gives a minute spasm. Daisy is swift to react, pivoting so abruptly that it nearly gives *Martin* whiplash. She zeroes in on the thing – one of its meatless, finger-like appendages still twitching weakly – and lunges towards it. There’s a revolting squelching noise as she crushes it beneath her boot. Martin can taste bile in the back of his throat.

“What the *fuck*.”

“Found out why Magnus wanted me out of the way,” Basira says tonelessly from where she stands behind Daisy.

“Flesh,” Daisy adds, entirely unnecessarily.

“Yeah,” Martin says, his voice pitching higher, “I can see that!”

“Probably want to avoid going down that way,” Daisy says, jerking her head at the nearest corridor, where the scatterplot trail of lifeless… *Flesh spiders,* as Jon calls them, disappears

around the corner.

“Noted,” Martin says, breathing through the nausea. “Wait, did you two – on your own–?”

“Daisy, mostly,” Basira says.

“But–”

Daisy reaches into her trouser pocket. The brooch she withdraws is instantly recognizable, looking exactly as its catalogue entry detailed. What the item description didn’t capture, however, was the sense of dread the sight of it inspires. It awakens something in Martin’s core – a primal, animal instinct that warns of a world that will eat him alive.

You are prey, it whispers urgently, *just the same as all the ancestral creatures that came before you.*

Martin’s reaction must be evident enough, because Daisy hastily returns the artefact to her pocket with an apologetic grimace. “It, uh… it works.”

“Oh,” Martin says breathlessly. “Oh, wow.”

“Yeah,” Basira snorts. “Apparently the universe decided we were due a win for once. Then promptly decided it didn’t want us to get too excited.”

With how quiet Jon has been for the last… however long passed before they emerged from the Lonely, Martin assumed he had fallen asleep. Now, though, Jon makes a noise – rusty, a bit wheezy, but nonetheless classifiable as a laugh.

Basira narrows her eyes. “What’s so funny?”

Jon hooks his chin over Martin's shoulder so he can address Basira directly. "Just… twice now – three times from my perspective – he's tried to orchestrate a Flesh mark, only to be foiled by the fact that it has terrible timing and can't follow instructions. He's going to be *livid*."

Hoarse as Jon's voice is – the sort of raspy, painful-sounding croak of someone speaking around a sore throat – there's still some genuine mirth in it.

"By the way, you've got a bit of…" Jon gestures vaguely, staring at Basira's shirt.

Basira follows his line of sight. When she sees the unidentifiable glob of meat clinging to the fabric just under her neckline, she swears and starts rubbing furiously at it with her sleeve. Jon lets out another chuckle.

It's the laugh of a man who hasn't slept in over a week and is strained nearly to his breaking point. Martin can relate: he hasn't gotten much rest himself recently, having spent most of the past several days fueled by anxiety and frankly irresponsible quantities of caffeine. Now that the immediate danger has passed, fatigue is finally catching up with him.

Basira is too busy glaring at Jon to notice that Daisy is also struggling to compose herself, forcibly suppressing a smirk and schooling her expression before stepping forward.

"C'mere," she says, her voice gruff as she overcompensates to hide her amusement. "You're making it worse. It's all over your sleeve now."

Basira scowls, but she doesn't argue. Daisy begins picking at the gore – how she can stomach doing that with her bare hands, Martin doesn't know. One of her hands migrates to Basira's shoulder. It rests there for a moment, then surreptitiously begins to brush away another previously-unnoticed bit of flesh. Basira is not so easily fooled.

"Ugh. It's everywhere, isn't it?"

“Yeah,” Daisy says, knowing better than to attempt a direct lie. “I don’t think this shirt is salvageable.”

“Whatever,” Basira sighs. “I need a shower. Incinerating our clothes can wait.”

“Speaking of which,” Martin says. “Do I want to know what kind of mess I’m walking into when I get upstairs?”

“Nothing worse than usual,” Basira says. “It wasn’t nearly as bad as when Hopworth attacked. Managed to keep it contained this time. Pretty sure nothing made it into the Institute proper–”

“It didn’t,” Daisy confirms. Then, more subdued, rubbing the back of her neck: “I, uh… I could sense them. Knew they were down here. It’s why they didn’t get very far. I’d probably know if there were any that got away.”

“So, the Hunt–?”

“Talk about it later,” Daisy says.

The way she casts a glance over her shoulder doesn’t escape Martin’s notice. Nor Basira’s, it seems, given the concerned furrow between her eyebrows.

“Looks like you could use a lie-down,” Daisy goes on. Then she lowers her voice and jerks her chin towards Martin’s shoulder, where Jon has once again buried his face. “Is he, uh…”

“I can hear you,” Jon grumbles. “And m’fine.”

“That’s what you always say.”

“You’re a walking biohazard and I have an isolation hangover,” Jon says, lifting his head only enough so that his reply isn’t muffled. “Talk later.”

He makes a shooing motion with one hand, then slumps forward again: a clear refusal to entertain any further discussion. Martin feels much the same.

“Wait,” Basira says. “Is Lukas–?”

“Dead.” Martin expects her to ask him to elaborate, prepares to argue his case for postponing the play-by-play (at *least* until they’ve all have a chance to clean up; ideally until after they’ve all gotten in a nap). Instead, she responds with only a single nod.

“Good.” She grabs Daisy by the elbow. “Shower. Now.”

“Hope the Institute’s plumbing can handle viscera,” Daisy quips as Basira steers her towards the ladder leading up into the archives.

Martin shakes his head in half-horrified hilarity. On the one hand, it’s difficult to fathom how *this* became their normal; on the other hand, it’s hard to say whether he’d even know what to do with *mundane* normal anymore. At some point, it’s either laugh, cry, or go lay facedown in a ditch somewhere.

“Come on,” he sighs, hiking Jon up higher on his back. “Let’s get you horizontal.”

Jon doesn’t protest – simply leans his entire weight forward, molding himself to Martin’s spine, burying his nose in the crook of Martin’s neck, and breathing a soft, “Alright.”

Chapter End Notes

- Catch Martin being EXTREMELY conscious of the terms & conditions of every deal he brokers, because he knows he’s not the only petty bastard who will gleefully exploit a

loophole.
Also catch him going out of his way to specify that Elias Bouchard, Head of the Magnus Institute, London is NOT included in any protection clause, and in fact targeting him is not only permitted but very much encouraged.

- Archive-speak citations for Chapter 33: 053; 154/141/088; 001/126/057; 047; 047; 004; 047; 004; 001/044.
- There's a canon line from Jon in 154 – "Maybe it's worth it? The risk – you and me, together, getting out of here" – that I sort of… borrowed and reworked for some of Martin's dialogue, so if that part sounds familiar, that's why, lol.
- And the "I can't imagine making any choice that would mean losing you. It hurts to know that you could" and "where you go, I go" lines are, of course, stolen wholesale from episodes 199 and 200, because if I'm already repurposing dialogue, I may as well run with it.

- It's probably obvious but writing climactic confrontations, especially physical ones, is NOT in my wheelhouse. It's one of the things I'm trying to practice. And it's something I'm going to have to do again rather soon since the gang's still gotta have a showdown with Jonah Magnus. So, if you're so inclined, feel free to let me know if there's anything that stands out that works or doesn't work here, so I can hopefully improve on it for next time.

- Speaking of which, full disclosure: I have no idea when the next chapter will be ready. Probably a couple months at least, given my recent pace. Thanks for sticking with me. <3

- Thank you for reading! Will probably reply to comments from last chapter over the next few days.

- Cross-posted to Tumblr here.

- **09/15/22:** Sorry the next chapter is taking so long, everyone. I finally got promoted to a full-time position at my job, there were a few weeks there where I was working six days a week (had to help out my parents during the summer season), AND life's been sort of hectic aside of that. So, I haven't had much downtime to write, and when I HAVE had downtime, my brain has just been too fried to write lmao. I am working on it though. <3

Together

Chapter Notes

CWs for Chapter 34: blood/injury mentions & wound care; brief mention of the Worm Incident and canon-typical impromptu corkscrew surgery; some Flesh content (mostly just... vague comments about how much of a process it is to clean up leftover viscera with only everyday cleaning supplies at hand, RIP); recollections of past parental emotional/verbal abuse (Martin's mother); Lonely-typical content (Jon and Martin are both struggling with some lingering effects, but they're both aware of it and able to talk themselves out of that headspace); mentions of non-sexual nudity (Jon considers broaching the topic, then decides that neither he nor Martin are in the right frame of mind for tackling a Boundaries Talk right now; there's no fear of rejection per se, just some run-of-the-mill anxiety/awkwardness about having that sort of discussion in general); very brief mention of post-traumatic stress re: getting kidnapped by the Circus; a little bit of Jon-typical better-off-dead thinking (milder than last chapter, but still present).
There's also a brief but somewhat heavy discussion at the end of the chapter regarding witnessing the traumatic death of a loved one (i.e. memories of Martin dying during the apocalypse. It's not described in detail how he died, but Jon does linger on what it was like emotionally to see a loved one passing in a way that wasn't peaceful and being unable to offer comfort or grieve properly. There's also a bit of dwelling on how he was unable to die himself and... y'know, the implications of being the closest thing to immortal that the End allows and very much wishing he wasn't.)
Let me know if I missed anything!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After hauling Jon out of the tunnels and into the Archives proper, Martin barely has time to catch his breath. Jon takes one look at him, opens his mouth to say something – and then his eyes lock onto Martin's throat. Whatever he was about to say is swallowed up by a soft, distressed noise that breaks Martin's heart a little. The next thing Martin knows, Jon is grabbing his hand and dragging him toward his office.

"Jon, wait – *careful,*" Martin says as Jon stumbles over his own feet. "Let's – you need to rest, you're barely standing–"

Jon ignores him, of course, tripping over the threshold to his office and staggering the short distance to his desk, where he proceeds to tear open drawers – one-handed, as he has yet to drop Martin's hand. Martin watches, bemused, as Jon starts tossing first aid supplies

haphazardly onto his desk – ripped-open boxes of plasters, half-unraveled rolls of bandages, no fewer than six tubes of antibiotic ointment.

“How many first aid stashes do you *have* in here?” Martin asks.

“Says the man who hid no less than a dozen caches of fire extinguishers in the stacks.”

“A baker’s dozen, actually,” Martin quips back. “And that turned out to be good foresight.”

“It did. And as much as I hate what it says about our lives that stockpiling first aid supplies is a necessity, at times like this I’m grateful for it.”

Apparently unable to find whatever he’s looking for in his desk, Jon turns around to rummage through the nearest filing cabinet. When he pulls out a large bottle of isopropyl alcohol, followed by an even larger bottle of hydrogen peroxide, Martin frowns.

“You haven’t been using those on open wounds, have you? They just irritate the skin–”

“And slow the healing process, yes, yes,” Jon says distractedly. “Cuts and scrapes are better cleaned with soap and water. You told me as much, back in… hmm. I think it was after Helen’s statement.”

“Oh, right,” Martin says, recalling now. “After your altercation with the bread knife.” Jon pointedly does not take the bait. “If I remember correctly, you weren’t very receptive to the information at the time.”

“I was not,” Jon agrees. He briefly glances at Martin, a contrite smile on his face. “And I was very put out when I looked it up later and learned that you were right. I didn’t want you to catch me pouring peroxide and alcohol down the sink, so I just stuffed them in a drawer where I wouldn’t have to look at them and called it a day.”

Martin's failed attempt to stifle his laugh comes out as a loud snort. "Sorry, sorry. That's just–"

"Ridiculous, I know," Jon says, grinning at his own expense. "I'm lucky that you find obstinacy– *aha,*" he interrupts himself, holding up a box of wound closure strips.

Martin sighs. "Is this really necessary?"

Jon doesn't miss a beat, his prior humor dissipating instantaneously. "Yes."

"Honestly, it's not that deep a cut. It's not even bleeding any–"

The rest of the sentence sticks in Martin's throat at the desperate look Jon gives him then.

"I lost you today," Jon says urgently. "I lost you, and then I didn't, and then I almost lost you *again*, all in the span of–" His breath hitches; his grip on Martin's hand tightens. One finger taps rapidfire on the box in his other hand. "Just let me – I need…"

Jon doesn't finish that thought, but he doesn't have to. Martin already knows the feeling; that need to channel long-drawn-out anxiety into something tangible.

"Okay," Martin says softly, rubbing one thumb over the back of Jon's hand, and he knows he's not imagining the way Jon's shoulders relax just slightly. "Let's go track down soap and water, then."

"Shower's open."

At the sound of Daisy's voice, Martin nearly jumps out of his skin, clutching Jon to him in a death grip.

"Sorry," she adds with a wince. "Didn't mean to sneak up on you."

"Fine," Martin gasps out as soon as he reassures himself that his heart isn't about to hammer its way out of his chest. It speaks to Jon's lethargy that he barely stirs, offering nothing but a brief tightening of his arms hugging Martin's torso and an abbreviated, nearly inaudible sigh coming from where he has his face nuzzled against Martin's breastbone. "It's – *fine*."

Throughout her long decline, Daisy never *fully* lost her preternatural talent for a silent approach, often unintentionally startling those around her with her sudden appearances. There have simply been fewer opportunities for such incidents to occur as of late. With her condition deteriorating, she's grown less independently mobile altogether. Some days, she can manage well enough; on others, she can barely move from room to room without assistance. Either way, she tends to require supervision, given the increasing frequency of her fainting spells.

At least, that was the state of things only days ago.

Now, she stands unassisted on sturdy legs, not even gripping the doorjamb for balance. She has yet to regain the weight she lost, but the hollowness in her cheeks no longer reaches her eyes: still hungry-looking, but brighter, keener. There's a tension in the way she holds herself, but where before it was the strain of barely holding herself together, she now exudes an aura of being poised to strike at a moment's notice.

The difference is so stark as to be unsettling.

Yet, despite regaining some of her former prowess, the brutality that once accompanied it is conspicuously absent. She seems to wilt under Martin's attention, self-conscious in a way that still clashes with his longstanding impression of her, for all she's changed. It's still *her* – not Daisy-the-cop, not Daisy-the-predator, but the version of her that Martin has been so painstakingly learning to trust over the past months. To see through Jon's eyes – or to at least *try* to fathom the way Jon perceives her.

It isn't until Martin registers that thought – and the relief it brings – that he fully realizes the fear that has been lurking in the recesses of his mind since the moment he stumbled out of the Lonely and saw the gruesome aftermath of her most recent hunt.

"I'll have to get used to…" Daisy rubs the back of her neck, grimacing. "I'll try to be more mindful."

Taking pity on her, Martin changes the subject. "Shower's open, you said?"

"Yeah," Daisy says, her posture relaxing marginally. "Thought you might want to clean up a bit?"

Her eyes drift to Martin's neckline and the rust-colored stain on his collar.

Martin wasn't lying when he said that it was a relatively superficial cut. It had long since clotted by the time they arrived back in the Archives. That didn't stop Jon from fretting over it – or from launching into a canned (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) lecture on the importance of proper wound care. It seemed to calm Jon's nerves, being given permission to fuss. He sank into an almost meditative focus, absorbing himself in the motions of cleaning the wound. As he settled into the task, he began a running commentary – stammering and anxious at first, but eventually evening out into something so performatively academic as to be cheeky, albeit tinged with an undertone of lingering unease. Martin patiently played his part, acting out only a token show of reluctance – a longsuffering sigh, a fond roll of the eyes, and a surrendering smile.

Jon's tentatively smug satisfaction was short-lived, however. Once it came to bandaging the cut, it was evident that his shaking hands weren't up to the task. He still fumbled doggedly to peel back the wrapper of a wound closure strip for a solid minute before he capitulated and allowed Martin to take over, albeit not without a bit of pouting first.

I am not *pouting,* Jon had pouted. And then pouted some more when Martin laughed at him for it. He couldn't help it. There was just something criminally endearing about the way that Jon – swaying on his feet, slurring his words, and barely able to keep his eyes open – could still muster up the wherewithal to be contrary. He's been like that for as long as Martin has known him; longer still, if Georgie is to be believed.

Martin wonders when exactly he started finding that charming. During Prentiss' attack, maybe: a bloody corkscrew chasing after the flesh-eating worms boring their way through Jon's leg, only a few inches of door standing between them and a grisly death, and *still* the persnickety bastard was able to push past all the pain and terror to do a bit of grousing. (Thinking back, Martin managed to find it in himself to nurture his hopeless little crush in those same dire moments, so maybe he isn't much better when it comes to assessing priorities.)

Of course, that mulishness is exasperating when Jon is actively sabotaging his own health and safety. But so long as it's confined to moments like this – huffing and crossing his arms while begrudgingly conceding a point, indulging in dramatics if the mood strikes – it's…

Well – endearing. Adorable, even, and Martin will suffer no argument to the contrary.

And then he remembers how very close he came to losing it all. A cold sensation blooms in his chest as the full weight of that thought settles over him. He shakes his head, forcing himself to focus instead on the weight of Jon in his arms. His grip on his composure is flimsy enough as it is, and he can't afford to go to pieces just now.

In any case, Jon's brief burst of petulance must have sapped what was left of his energy. When, after finishing Jon's abandoned first aid attempt, Martin suggested that they sit down and rest for a while, Jon surprised him by not offering a single argument. In fact, he seems to have interpreted it as an invitation to a cuddle session, which… well, Martin isn't about to complain. Jon isn't the only one craving closeness right now. Martin is reluctant to let go of him long enough to do much else. Not with the Lonely still clinging to him. To both of them.

Except… they do both need to clean up. Martin had been hoping that the powdery layer of apocalypse dust would disappear once they left the Lonely, but no such luck. He'd brushed them both off as best he could, wiped down any exposed skin with a damp flannel, but he can feel the grimy residue as he combs his fingers through Jon's hair. They have yet to even change their clothes. Martin's skin crawls at the reminder – and then continues crawling when he contemplates the potential state of the shower right about now.

"*Were* the pipes able to handle viscera…?" Martin asks hopefully.

“Well enough, yeah. You’d think an old building like this would struggle, but…” Daisy shrugs. “Wouldn’t be surprised if it was designed or upgraded with this sort of thing in mind, given what this place attracts.”

“And Artefact Storage,” Martin says, wrinkling his nose. They’ve all heard the stories. He used to think that they were hyperbolic – or even fabricated wholesale, meant to thrill or frighten new hires – but he’s seen enough of the supernatural by now to take the rumors at face value.

“I made sure it was clean, though,” Daisy says. “Which – we should probably put in a request for more bleach. And a new shower curtain. And… maybe a new mop? Or two, because Diana saw me taking one from the supply closet in the library, and she told me point blank that she didn’t want to know what I needed it for and she didn’t want it back.”

“That sounds like her,” Martin says with a chuckle.

“She also kindly requested that the Archives stop ‘requisitioning’ things from the library without at least shooting off an email letting her know so she can update their inventory. And then I think she realized that I wasn’t going to bite her head off, because she went on a tear about Basira dodging her emails. Something about a missing book.”

“Topographia Hibernica,” Martin sighs. “She’s emailed me too. Multiple times. Apparently it’s the only parallel text reproduction we have and it was missing when they did inventory last month. I think she’d storm down here herself if it wasn’t for Peter’s ‘workplace fraternization’ policy.”

Daisy snorts. “Basira better get on it then.”

“What?”

“Well, Lukas isn’t here to enforce the policy, is he?”

Martin is puzzled for the few seconds it takes for that new reality to sink in.

“Oh,” he says faintly, the implications dawning on him. “Right.”

Daisy jerks her chin at Jon. “He asleep?”

A muffled, disgruntled noise comes from somewhere in the vicinity of Martin’s chest, where Jon still has his face buried.

“Don’t know whether to take that as a ‘yes,’ a ‘no,’ or a ‘try again later,’” Daisy says wryly. “I should get back to Basira anyway. Maybe head down to the tunnels, assess the damage. Probably better to tackle the cleanup now, before it starts… decomposing, or congealing, or whatever Flesh carcasses do.”

Martin wrinkles his nose. “Are you up for that?”

“Don’t have much of a choice, do we? There are forensic remediation companies out there, but they’d take one look at it, assume it’s a crime scene, and call the police. Then we’d have Sectioned officers poking around – and probably the ECDC, too, which would be even more of a headache. Anyway, we all decided it wasn’t worth exposing civilians to–”

“No, I just meant…” Martin falters, biting his tongue against the urge to fuss.

In all the years he cared for his mother, he never found way to express concern that didn’t incite backlash. Too delicate, and she would scold him for walking on eggshells: how could he approach his own mother so timidly, treat her like she was some sort of horrid beast, after all the work she’d put in nurturing him? Too sympathetic, and she would accuse him of infantilizing her, insulting her intelligence: she still had all of her faculties, she wasn’t *senile,* she didn’t appreciate being condescended to by her dullard of a son, and she certainly didn’t need his *pity*.

He tried being impassive, approaching her with an almost formal sort of politeness, tactful yet to-the-point so as to not subject her to his presence long enough to exhaust her patience. This she construed as indifference. She would make passive-aggressive comments about how *hard* it must be to be a half-decent son. If he thought *she* was a burden, he should consider what it was like to singlehandedly raise such a demanding child. She never expected him to make anything of himself, but was it really so much to expect him to do the bare minimum? Was he so ungrateful, so heartless that he couldn't even *pretend* to care about his own mother?

Oftentimes, he was too exhausted to prepare a script. He had an obligation to at least *try* to help, but he would do so with a blunt sort of resignation, knowing full well that he would be dismissed at best, if not have a vicious tirade unleashed upon him. Either way, she would refuse his assistance, inevitably overtax herself, and the subsequent fatigue and pain would perpetuate her foul mood.

And sometimes… sometimes he would lose his patience. She almost seemed to enjoy those moments – as if pushing him to his breaking point wasn't proof that he was only human, but rather evidence of a rotten core, and all she was doing was exposing the deception. She would smile, thin-lipped and triumphant. *Just like your father,* she would sneer, and the sense of vindication in her voice was the closest he ever came to feeling as though he had pleased her.

Sometimes it felt like she could sense when he'd had a long day, a *hard* day, and she would pile more and more vitriol onto him until she found the last straw that would shatter his composure. He would round on her, red-faced and seething, arms moving in sweeping, furious gestures, and the desperation would pour out of him: *can't you see I'm trying* and *I'm doing my best* and *I don't know what more you want from me–*

And once – only once – *I can't do this anymore, Mum!*

Once was all it took. That, as it turned out, had been *her* final straw. Or perhaps it was simply the decisive victory for which she had been waiting. The very next day, when he got home from work, just as he was setting down her customary afternoon cup of oolong, she informed him – looking him directly in the eye, shrewd and assessing – that she had made arrangements to move into the care home.

In that light, it's no wonder that Martin has some baggage concerning his instinct for coddling. It took surprisingly little time for that reticence to fade in his early interactions with Jon. Perhaps it had something to do with how quickly it became clear that Jon's prickliness was born of insecurity rather than any real personal resentment. It took somewhat longer for Jon's reluctance to *accept* help wane, but he's been receptive to it for long enough that Martin no longer harbors any anxiety in offering that comfort and care. It still hurts, those few-and-far-between moments when Martin's efforts are rejected, but Jon never lets it linger for long.

Daisy, though… despite the time they've spent in each other's company in recent weeks, Martin still doesn't know her well enough to predict how she might react. Backlash from her wouldn't hurt nearly much as it did from his mother – as it might coming from Jon – but…

The fact that Martin's spent the last couple minutes dwelling so heavily on those memories speaks to the lingering influence of the Lonely. He feels raw, and exhausted, and brittle, and he would prefer to avoid the sting of rejection if at all possible.

"Martin?" Daisy prompts, dragging him away from his thoughts. He looks up to see her brow furrowed with concern. "You alright?"

"Mm?"

"You were looking a bit… lost."

No sense in belaboring the point any further than he already has.

"I don't think you've rested yet?" he says in a rush. "You've been… I mean, you're not used to this level of activity? Maybe you should take it slow. Give yourself time to recover…?"

Daisy's expression is unreadable.

"I feel fine," she says after a few seconds. There's no inkling of irritation in her voice, so Martin decides to press on.

“You do now, but when the adrenaline wears off–”

“No, it’s–” Daisy sighs. “I’m not… ignoring my limits, or anything like that.” She hesitates. “It’s the artefact. I think it sort of – fast-tracked my recovery.”

“But–”

“I don’t want to be still right now,” Daisy blurts out. “I’ve spent months resting, and–” She glances over her shoulder. “I just – I have to keep moving, you know?”

“It’s the Hunt, isn’t it,” Martin guesses. It’s not a question.

“Not like it’s unexpected. And it’s not like the Hunt ever really left, anyway. Not fully.” Daisy’s wan smile doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “It’s… taken a different form, compared to what I’m used to. Puts me a bit on edge, to tell the truth–” She cuts off her nervous laugh abruptly, takes a sharp breath in, and releases it in a shuddery exhale. “It’s… fine. I’ll be fine. Just need time to adjust.”

Martin gives her a dubious look, but Daisy is already turning to leave.

“Get some rest. I’ll be in the tunnels with Basira. Shout down if you need anything.”

With that, she retreats before Martin has a chance to reply.

Jon’s uneasy not-quite-sleep is interrupted by a quiet conversation happening somewhere over his head. He surfaces just enough to confirm that both presences in the room are to be trusted. It takes a few dread-filled seconds to identify them, but upon doing so, he relaxes.

With Daisy and Martin here, he's about as safe as he can be. They aren't speaking urgently, so he can let his attention drift once more, lulled by the sound of familiar voices–

Voices he never expected to hear again. Voices that are long-dead. Voices that can't possibly be *real*–

He tamps down that vestige of the Lonely with as much ferocity as he can muster. Then he pours all of his focus into the warm, solid reality of the arms enveloping him, and the fingers combing through his hair, and the miraculous, inexplicable, indisputable rhythm of a heart beating strong just inches beneath the spot where Jon rests his head. He lets himself be carried away by the rise and fall of Martin's chest – in and out like a steady tide, buoying him up and down, cradling him in a firm reminder that he is *here,* and *real,* and *alive, alive, alive*–

Eventually, he hears the door click shut.

Then his pillow starts to move.

"Jon?" Martin keeps his volume low, but Jon can still feel the faint vibration against his ear where it's pressed to Martin's clavicle. "Jon, we need to get up."

"Alternatively," Jon mumbles, "we could *not* do that."

"Daisy says the shower's free." Martin pauses expectantly. "As adorable as you're being right now–"

"Not *adorable*–"

"We both look like we got on the wrong side of a bag of flour." Martin takes Jon by the shoulders and pushes him upright. Jon allows it, but not without an accusing scowl. "Your hair looks like it's gone all grey."

“I happen to know that you like my greys.”

Jon smirks as the comment has its intended effect: Martin sputters, his cheeks going pink.

“That’s–!” Martin huffs. “None of your business.” Jon raises an eyebrow. “And don’t look so smug, because right now I can’t tell what’s grey hair and what’s *debris*.”

When Jon doesn’t reply, Martin sighs and gently tips Jon out of his lap.

“Come on, love,” he says, standing and hauling Jon upright. “Up you get.”

Jon hums, unable to suppress a smile. “Called me love.”

A flicker of apprehension crosses Martin’s face. “Is that okay?”

“Perfect,” Jon says. He’s too tired to be embarrassed by how lovesick he sounds.

“Oh.” Martin sounds pleasantly surprised. As if Jon could possibly object to the affection he’d been starved of for ages. “Cool.”

“‘Cool,’” Jon repeats.

“Oh, shut up,” Martin says.

Whatever adrenaline had kept Jon on his feet when they first left the Lonely seems to have worn off, because Martin has to half-carry him to the shower.

“Do you want me to wait outside, or–?”

“Stay,” Jon says abruptly. He’s halfway to asking whether Martin wants to join him before he reminds himself that there’s a whole discussion about *boundaries* that needs to take place.

The first time Jon forced himself to broach the topic, it was nerve-wracking. It’s bound to be awkward, still – these sorts of conversations always are, in his experience – but it helps knowing for certain how Martin will react. Still, seeing as they haven’t even discussed yet what they *are* now, it probably isn’t the best time to spring on Martin the fact that, actually, Jon isn’t averse to Martin seeing him naked, because he knows that Martin won’t expect things to go any farther than that.

Then Jon remembers the first time Martin saw the extent of the scarring on his body – that well-meaning but nonetheless crushing split-second flash of shock-horror-anger-pity before Martin schooled his expression into something less unbearable. The stab of apprehension Jon feels at the prospect is probably a good indication that he isn’t emotionally prepared for that level of vulnerability right this moment.

And all of that is a moot point, because it’s not as if this shower is big enough for the two of them, anyway.

“Just – just in the room?” Jon clarifies. “So long as you’re comfortable with that.”

“Oh,” Martin says, surprised – and perhaps a bit flustered, judging by the slight flush in his cheeks. “Yes, that’s – that’s fine. I’ll just – I’ll face the other way, shall I?”

Jon still isn’t braced for the panic that drops over him as Martin pulls away to give him privacy, but he must do a decent job of masking it, because Martin doesn’t call him on it. He manages to go through the motions well enough, albeit in the wrong order – turning on the water before belatedly realizing he’s still dressed, at which point he has to strip out of wet clothes. It’s a miracle he manages to coordinate that without falling over. He nudges the damp pile of clothes into a corner, dismissing it as a problem for future Jon. Not for the first time, he silently thanks *past* Jon for investing in a shower stool, because trying to focus on standing *and* washing himself simultaneously seems like an accident waiting to happen right now.

He debates leaving his hair to deal with later, but Martin was right about the state of it. As usual, he's quick about it, unable to tolerate the feeling of shampoo on his skin for too long before he feels the need to shuck his skin off entirely. He manages to get it done without triggering his gag reflex, which he'll count as a rare win. He accepts the towel Martin offers, wraps it around himself as best he can, and trades places with Martin, who averts his eyes as they pass one another. Redressing is somewhat easier than shedding soaked clothes, but it still leaves him winded.

When the shower shuts off, he hands Martin a towel, then closes his eyes and waits while Martin steps out to get dressed.

"Okay, I'm decent," Martin says. Jon opens his eyes again to see Martin vigorously toweling off his hair. "I feel *much* better now."

Then he tosses his towel to the side – apparently following Jon's lead and relegating it as a problem for future Martin – and grabs Jon's hand again.

By unspoken agreement, the two of them retreat to the tunnels. Jon has amassed a veritable nest of blankets there over the months, which makes it as good a place as any to collapse on the floor and unwind from the events of the day. Further down the corridor and around a corner, Daisy and Basira busy themselves cleaning up the aftermath of the latest supernatural intrusion into the closest thing they have to a safe haven. Most of their talk is swallowed up by the strange acoustics of the tunnels, but the tones of disgust are unmistakable.

"I feel sort of bad," Martin says as a particularly vicious swear echoes their way. "Shouldn't we be helping them?"

"You already offered," Jon points out. "They declined."

"But–"

"I think Basira's exact words were, 'You look terrible. Go faint somewhere else.'"

“I still feel bad,” Martin grumbles, but he doesn’t protest further. A minute of companionable silence passes before Martin breaks it by reaching up to scratch vigorously at his scalp.

“Still itchy?”

“Yes,” Martin says with a shudder. “I know I got it all out, but it doesn’t *feel* like it. Was the end of the world really that dusty?”

Jon breathes a soft, uneasy laugh. “No. Not like that, anyway. Every domain was different. The Lonely is just… heavy-handed with its metaphors.”

How to explain? How to force the truth of it into the shape of words and still have it convey the enormity of that weight?

Jon is… he’s *old,* is the thing. Far older than he looks.

It used to be the other way around – and perhaps it still is, from the perspective of this timeline – but all told, he’s been an Archive for far, *far* longer than he was human. He spent the greater part of his unnatural life haunting a wasteland. Being here, now, with things back to the way they were before it all went from bad to *worst* – it’s still surreal. There’s a large, inseparable part of him that feels like he never left. Like it never left *him.*

Like maybe it never will.

“It just feels like it’s always clinging to me,” he says quietly. “All of… *that.* Like a residue.”

Jon has to look away from the heartbroken expression on Martin’s face. For a long moment, Martin does not react, save for the tightening of his arms around Jon.

“Thank you,” he says eventually, just barely loud enough for Jon to hear.

Jon blinks, confused. “For what?”

“Choosing me.” Martin tucks a lock of hair behind Jon’s ear, then runs a thumb across his jawbone. “I know it wasn’t an easy decision.”

“It was, though.”

“Didn’t seem like it.”

“I was – I *am* conflicted about how much of a danger I pose.” Still feels – *knows* – that the world at large would be better off with him out of the picture, but saying it outright would only upset Martin. “But I couldn’t let you stay there. Not before, and not now. I knew nothing short of compelling you would make you leave without me, and – even if I *did* have the stomach for that, you’d keep trying to find your way back. You would throw yourself up against the Lonely until it drained you of everything that makes you Martin Blackwood.” Jon swallows hard. “I watched you fade away once – go somewhere I couldn’t follow you, no matter how much you didn’t want to – you knew you were leaving me alone, and…”

And he had been inconsolable. They both had. It was not a peaceful passing, and it was not a parting that left room for any closure. Martin might have died knowing he was loved, but that didn’t change the fact that Jon was unable to even *try* to convey the depth of it with his own words.

Even if he had been able to speak in his own voice, there was nothing he could have said to offer comfort in those final moments. Any of the things that people might normally say to soothe a dying person – reassurances that the living would be okay, hopes that they might reunite in some ideal ever-after – would have been insincere when both of them knew that Jon would unravel in the absence of a reason to do otherwise; that all of Jon’s hopes would die with Martin.

Heralding the apocalypse *should* have been the culmination of the twisting, web-spun path he had been treading all his life. As it turns out, it had only been the penultimate blow. This final

loss, on top of all the other horrors that had been fuel for the fire, was the capstone that rendered him to ashes.

"It was the worst thing I ever had to survive," Jon says, his throat tight with the strain of holding back tears. "I couldn't watch it happen again."

This time, Martin says nothing. Possibly there are no words, no poetic cliché to encompass the breadth of *this, them, now.* Instead, they hold one another, weathering the vulnerability of the moment until, eventually, they drop off into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

- [Justin McElroy voice] Like Chilean miners rising from the depths…

But seriously – it's been a year since I last updated, and I'm very sorry for that. I got promoted to a full-time position at my job last summer. My previous position left room for me to do some writing during the day (before afternoon hits and my ADHD meds wear off), but my current job description and schedule majorly changed my routine and my dumb ass responds to major life changes with, "Welp, I threw off my own groove! Momentum is dead! Time to abandon every aspect of routine we've been scraping together up til now and start from scratch!"

Which is a really good recipe for burnout, and then anxiety surrounding said burnout, which is… very unconstructive. The main thing I'm stuck on is finale stuff, which makes sense, because when I start nearing the conclusion of a project I start to panic and hate everything that came before it, which is… something I'm working on. I'm trying to get back into the flow of things, and I think posting what I DO have ready might help take some of the self-imposed pressure off and make writing less of an anxiety-inducing teeth-pulling exercise.

The upshot is a shorter chapter with not much plot – mostly hurt/comfort and character study, to get me back in the headspace for writing these characters. If I'd posted this as part of a larger chapter like I'd originally been intending, I probably would have ended up cutting big chunks of this as superfluous, but I'm a sucker for the Mutual Caretaking Following a Traumatic Experience trope, so I indulged myself with another prolonged hurt/comfort tangent. I hope that's okay. I never get tired of reading these sorts of diversions in longfic myself; hopefully it's not too tedious for any of you. Not entirely happy with it as it is, might do some more editing later, but if I keep worrying at it I'm going to end up scrapping what I have and starting the chapter over yet again, lol.

Anyways, that's it for this segment of the badbrain apology tour. Thanks for everyone who's stuck around, and hello to a few new readers who have been commenting over the

months. I'm not sure when the next update will be, but this story won't be abandoned unless I state otherwise (and I have no plans of doing so), it's just taking me a while to actually Do The Thing. I'm still excited for some epilogue plot bunnies I want to write and I keep trying to tell myself that I gotta actually finish the thing before I indulge myself.

Might respond to some comments from last chapter in the coming days/weeks so apologies in advance for sudden months-belated responses out of nowhere. Just know that I really do read and appreciate the responses. They are high-octane fuel for a dopamine-challenged brain. <3

- No citations for this chapter. Jon deserves a lil break from Beholding fuckery, as a treat, before I yeet him right back into it.

- P. S. I figured it might be too much of a diversion to write out all the commiserating banter between Daisy and Basira that I might like to in that last section, but just know that it's along the lines of, "I hate the amount of viscera there is. Where's a dedicated supernatural forensic cleanup company when you need one? Jared Hopworth tried his hand at small business with his running-a-gym and killing-a-butcher-and-stealing-his-shop ventures; can we please get some avatars with business savvy willing to use their powers to make a profit in a way that is at least no more actively malicious than mundane capitalism? *Hello????"*

- UPDATE 08/09/24: Just popping in to mention that I haven't abandoned this story. I'm in grad school again as of last spring, and juggling coursework while working full-time hasn't left me much spare time for hobbies, lol. I don't have an ETA on the next chapter, but I will return to it when my life gets less hectic!

End Notes

- Comments greatly appreciated, and constructive criticism is welcome!! I've never actually written and posted a multi-chapter fic from start to finish, but I want to commit myself to this one. I'm using it as practice for my own original story writing going forward, so knowing what works and what doesn't will be helpful feedback for me.

- I'm also on Tumblr at bubonickitten!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!